



# BAREED MISTA3JIL

True Stories

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*for all of you with stories  
that are yet to be told*

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First Published in Beirut, Lebanon by Meem

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First Printing: May 2009

ISBN 978-9953-0-1467-8

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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There is much mystery and fantasy surrounding the concept of female sexuality in Lebanon. Even more taboo is the topic of homosexuality, and a lot more has been said about male homosexuality than female homosexuality. This comes as no surprise in a patriarchal society where women's issues are often dismissed. And sexuality, because it touches upon reclaiming our bodies and demanding the right to desire and pleasure, is the ultimate taboo of women's issues. We have published this book in order to introduce Lebanese society to the real stories of real people whose voices have gone unheard for hundreds of years. They live among us, although invisible to us, in our families, our schools, our workplaces, and our neighborhoods. Their sexualities have been mocked, dismissed, denied, oppressed, distorted, and forced into hiding. We hope that the stories found here will touch the hearts and convince the minds of the readers, so that we can come together as Lebanese from all regions, beliefs, and backgrounds to respect and embrace all differences, especially those of gender identity and sexual orientation.

## WHO IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

This book brings together the stories of women who are not heterosexual. It seeks to question and challenge the common misunderstanding that the only alternative to heterosexuality is homosexuality. We tend to label people as either straight (heterosexual) or gay (homosexual). During the research process for this book, however, we came across such a wide array of sexualities that it was impossible to lump them all into the one "homosexual" category. That's why we call it a book about lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women, and transgender persons. It's quite a mouthful, yes, but it is important to start acknowledging and recognizing this range of sexualities. For the purposes of this introduction, we have used the term "queer" to represent all non-heterosexual identities. "Queer" was once a derogatory term used to define homosexuals as deviant, strange, or abnormal. It is very similar to the current Arabic derogatory term, "shazz," which literally means "deviant" and is the most common Arabic term for "homosexual." While queer theory is a social school of thought that aims to deconstruct understandings of gender altogether, the word is also commonly used as an umbrella term for non-conforming sexualities, and that is how we are using it in this introduction. One must keep in mind, however, that when used in the personal stories, "queer" is a significant sexual and political identity, different from "lesbian," as the stories themselves demonstrate.

Although often suppressed by social norms and standards, human sexuality is very fluid. This fluidity exists in all cultures, countries, and regions, manifesting itself differently according to each particular tradition and history. Increasingly, though, it is becoming harder for what the world calls "developing countries" to study and look at sexuality outside of the Western construct of "LGBT," which is the most widely used term to denote non-heterosexual individuals and communities.

LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual. What is the difference between this "LGBT" construct and what we, in the Arab world, express in terms of sexuality?

Human interaction and relationships differ according to culture, and notable differences between Arab cultures and those of the West include a stronger value of family and communal bonds, in addition to a more emphasized gender segregation. Unfortunately, the most globally visible queer identities today are generated from Europe and North America. We see gay characters on television, in Hollywood movies, in sit-coms, and we see gay icons increasingly rise in Western media. With these media personalities of highly individualistic and consumerist societies comes a furthering of stereotypes linked to what it means to be homosexual, bisexual, or transsexual.

In Lebanon, however, many varying factors play into the formation of an Arab identity. Religion, sect, family, community, geography, political affiliation, ethnicity, and social class – all being inherited factors – play big roles in defining who we are as Lebanese. Sexual orientation is not a socially acceptable factor, and it becomes a struggle to define oneself as lesbian or bisexual while holding on to the other different identities that one deems important.

Another common misunderstanding in the Arab world is that homosexuality is an import from the West, an abnormality that cannot exist within Arab societies. What is important to remember, however, is that sexuality existed even before colonization and before the heavy influence of Western movies and music on our culture. Sexuality is by no means alien to the Arab and Muslim worlds. Documents from early Islamic writers show that sexuality was addressed in a surprisingly casual and liberal manner. Abu Nuwas (750-810) was one of the greatest Arab poets of his time and is widely taught in Lebanese high-school curricula. He was infamous for his bold satire and for openly writing about things

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which Islam forbade, such as wine, sex, and masturbation. His poetry was a direct, and often erotic, celebration of male sexual (and mostly homosexual) prowess.

The poems below illustrate Abu Nuwas's writing of homosexual romance,

I die of love for him, perfect in every way,  
Lost in the strains of wafting music.  
My eyes are fixed upon his delightful body  
And I do not wonder at his beauty.  
His waist is a sapling, his face a moon,  
And loveliness rolls off his rosy cheek  
I die of love for you, but keep this secret:  
The tie that binds us is an unbreakable rope.  
How much time did your creation take, O angel?  
So what! All I want is to sing your praises.

(Love in Bloom; after Montell, p. 95)<sup>1</sup>

and his open praise of sex between men,

For young boys, the girls I've left behind  
And for old wine set clear water out of mind.  
Far from the straight road, I took without conceal  
The winding way of sin, because [this horse]  
Has cut the reins without remorse,  
And carried away the bridle and the bit.

(A Boy is Worth More Than a Girl;  
after Montell, p. 91)

<sup>1</sup> Abu Nuwas, *Le Vin, le Vent, la Vie*, (tr. Vincent Mansour Montell), Sindbad, Paris, 1979.

In his discourse on Orientalism, Edward Said<sup>2</sup> argued that with the formation of a "Western" identity with the rise of the British Empire and its colonial powers in Asia and Africa, came a curious exploration of "the other." Explorations of the Arab "other" in the late 19th century and into the 20th century defined Arabs with sexually loaded terms like "promiscuous," "polygamous," and "homosexual." Jens Hanssen argues that the colonialist French period in Beirut in particular was challenged by "sexuality and gender constructions [in] conflict over patriarchy and masculinity which were still prevalent in society at the time. The Orientalist discourses on Beirut shifted by sexual conquest to behavioral containment as French hygienists struggled to come to terms with the city's fast-paced growth and transformation that threatened the health of the foreign community and integrity of the established, local male elite."<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Massad's book *"Desiring Arabs,"* published in 2007, presents the most powerful analysis of how "Arab historiography developed to a considerable extent around the repudiation (—) of all sexual desires it identified as part of the Arab past and which the European present condemns and sometimes champions."<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, international politics over the past decades have persistently fed the polarization of the "West" vs. the rest of the world. The Arab world has seen a strong return to traditional values and conservative moralities. Sexuality has, thus, become silenced, governed by shame and misconceived myths. This book, in many ways, comes to dispel these myths.

<sup>2</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Hanssen, Jens. "Sexuality, health and colonialism in postwar 1860 Beirut." *Sexuality in the Arab World*. Samir Khalaf and John H. Gagnon. London: Saqi, 2006. 63-84.

<sup>4</sup> Massad, Joseph Andoni. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.



## VOICES IN ARABIC

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Language is an important note to make in this Introduction. This book was written first in English and then translated into Arabic. The initial reason was that the authors were personally more comfortable writing in English. But when we began the process of translation into Arabic, we were faced with a powerful blockade against talking about sexuality. The words didn't exist to express exactly what we wanted them to, and we were constantly struggling between the Lebanese Arabic dialect that we speak in our everyday lives and classical Arabic which is traditionally used in writing or in the media. We naturally wanted to write the Arabic version of this book in classical Arabic, but found it remarkably distant from the real-life experiences of this book's stories. In an effort to make the stories come out more authentically, we opted for writing the conversations or key phrases in Lebanese Arabic dialect verbatim, within the classically written Arabic text.

In both versions, we still struggled with euphemisms and scientific words to describe sexuality terms versus crude slang that differs in different regions of Lebanon. We've tried to analyze the reasons for this other than the obvious cause being that we don't talk about sexuality much in the Arab world. Arabic as a language has not adapted itself to create new words or a more comfortable use of existing words to describe things related to sexual expression.

Additionally, homosexuals use a sexuality jargon that is different from heterosexuals in that it is an underground lingo, as well as a more liberated discussion of sex. And so, many of the Arabic terms for things like "coming out" and "gay" have been transliterated into Arabic. It was hard to translate terms like "wetness" or to translate a gender-neutral English text into Arabic without using gendered terms. Sadly, and for the lack of Arabic expressions, queer people in Lebanon are more likely

to frame their identity in English or French because that's where these words exist more freely and where we find internet pages and papers written about sexuality. So the struggle to define oneself as lesbian and Arab becomes increasingly difficult. *language*

The rigidly "gendered" nature of the Arabic language posed an equally difficult challenge in recounting the stories that focused on gender identity issues. Like many other languages, such as French, Arabic uses the male pronoun as default in all writing. Even non-person inanimate words such as "table" or "chair" are gendered.

This book is primarily targeted at the Lebanese heterosexual and homophobic societies, who have varied taste in reading Arabic or English. We also think it will be of value to girls and young women, in schools and universities, who are starting to question their sexuality, or whose sisters seem to be undergoing this process of questioning. And so we're presenting it in English and Arabic in order to reach a wider audience.

## HOW WAS THIS BOOK WRITTEN?

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The stories in this book are entirely based on conversations with over 150 women and transgender people who we interviewed in Beirut. We wanted the stories to come through as authentically as possible with a consistency in the narratives, so every single story went through a journey of its own. At first, we thought it was most important to find the stories from the people who wanted to tell them. But as the work on the book progressed, we found it necessary not only to include stories ready to come out, but also to search for those that weren't. It became more important to truly represent the wide range of experiences around

How class plays a role in identity formation & articulation. Class is a very clear share

a certain topic, so as to increase our chance of covering a very diverse community without leaving radically different voices, opinions, or life experiences out. We realized, for example, after talking to a number of women about their relationships with their parents, that attitudes towards the issue differed immensely. So we didn't want to have stories that were only about disapproving parents, although that was the most common perspective. We set out to find the entirely opposite experience of a lesbian coming out to supportive and loving parents.

We did not sign the stories with any names, nicknames or initials because we wanted to guard the safety and confidentiality of the brave people who told their stories. And because each story is a representation of an experience common to hundreds of individuals in Lebanon – although the details may change, the depth of the human experience is quite common – we opted not to use any single name or person for each story. The definite answer to the question: “What is the life of a typical Lebanese lesbian like?” is that there is no “typical Lebanese lesbian” and no single life story common to all. One may, however, state with a high degree of certainty that the stories in this book represent many common fragments from the lives of many queer women in this country. We cannot claim, however, that we could ever gather or represent the entire range of experiences in one small book. As we've already mentioned, Lebanon's extremely fragmented society, along with the huge array of sexual diversity, make for an uncountable number of experiences all different, yet all strikingly similar in their common struggle for acceptance.

And so, we recorded interviews with every storyteller, listened to the interviews a number of times, transcribed them, and then wrote them out into a narrative piece. The story was then sent again to the storyteller for approval and editing. Often, months passed between these two phases and big changes were made by the storytellers to their own stories, as they grew and changed and learned more about their own selves. After that came the editing process with a number of editors and readers, who

also suggested emphasizing some parts, expanding or shortening the stories, and focusing on the most important segments. The lucky stories made it through this process untouched and were published exactly as they were told the first time. The less fortunate pieces were bounced back between the writers and the storytellers, cooked, mixed, broken to pieces, redrawn, and rewritten many times until we were able to say exactly what was meant to be said.

A few of the stories were written and submitted by the storytellers themselves. The reason we didn't compile the stories in this book by solely asking for submissions was because we knew we were going to get submissions from a very small group of women, who are privileged enough to be able to write and articulate their stories. We knew, too, that because, as women, we are sometimes made to believe that our stories are not important, that many would hold back. We could imagine the voices in some women's heads, convincing them that their stories, their lives are not important to share with the world, that they are alone, or that their feelings and experiences are mundane. What we hope they will come to see, as you will see too in these pages, is that they are truly what they jokingly call themselves: women warriors.

As you will discover in the upcoming pages, the misconceptions surrounding queer women in Lebanon are abundant, even among queer women themselves. The most common misconception they fall under is that they are alone in the world. The oppression and repression that keeps non-heterosexuals invisible leads many – especially young people – to believe that they are freaks of nature, that their desires and feelings are abnormal, that their bodies are “unnatural.” Behind these few stories are the lives of tens of thousands of women and transgenders in Lebanon.

Our purpose was to present the stories of this marginalized, invisible community straight from the hearts of the people who lived them.



We didn't want to provide mere sociological observations or pretend to summarize the life experiences in generalized studies. It isn't easy for anyone to reveal themselves to the public with such honesty and vulnerability, especially those who have spent lifetimes hiding their true selves from even those closest to them. The women and transgender persons who have shared their stories with you are brave and heroic and deserve our gratitude for the mere fact of them speaking up. And it is important for the people who have so generously shared their stories to know that they have not gone to waste, that they will not be buried.

The original idea of publishing a book like this came on a spring night in 2006, while driving down Hamra Street in Beirut. We were having a conversation about the lack of publications by and about queer people in Lebanon. At that time, we wanted to write a book called "Gay Lebanon" and to include in it submissions from Lebanese queers. We wondered where we were going to get any lesbian stories because we knew very few lesbians at the time. Over the three years that passed, we witnessed the rise of a remarkable lesbian community that brought a powerful new meaning to queer solidarity, understanding, and grassroots activism, and it became clearer to us that these were the people whose stories needed to be heard. It took a little over a year to get this project together, and while the initial proposed titles were picked from lesbian terms or experiences, we decided on the more ambiguous "Bareed Mistajil" as a name for our book. "Bareed Mistajil" has a very close meaning to "Express Mail," but a better translation would be "Mail in a Hurry." It reflects both the urgency of getting these stories across and also the private nature of the stories – like letters written, sealed, and sent out to the world.

In a way, the journey of these stories is similar to the stories themselves. They have come out of the closet.

## THE THEMES PRESENTED IN THIS BOOK

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Originally meant to be split into chapters, every chapter on a particular theme, the stories refused to be tied down to any one single chapter. Instead, we tagged every story with the theme it addressed fully or partially. While we do not profess to have done any sociological or psychological research, we have come up with some analysis on the different broad themes presented in these stories: Coming Out, Discrimination, Family, Self-Image, Relationships, Sexual Diversity, Religion, Self-Discovery, Emigration, Activism, and Community.

### The Coming Out Process

Studies have varied about the percentages of homosexuality among populations, ranging from 1% to 20%. According to the Penguin Atlas of Human Sexual Behavior, "around 2% (12 million) of the world's women and 4% (24 million) of the world's men live exclusively as homosexuals."<sup>5</sup> An estimate commonly used by gay activists has been a rounded 10%. While it is an important political strategy to insist that a sizable percentage of a society is homosexual in order to demonstrate the significance of granting this community a set of rights or to show that it is not in fact an abnormality but a healthy part of the diverse human sexuality, such statistics are highly contestable. Variations of such studies have or haven't included people who have had homosexual experiences (whether falling in love or engaging in sexual acts with people of the same gender) but identify as heterosexuals. Following the same logic that it is impossible to lump people into the homosexual category, it is equally impossible to "count" homosexuals.

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<sup>5</sup> Penguin Atlas of Human Sexual Behavior. Judith Mackay, Penguin, 2000

The point is that homosexuals do exist – and in large numbers – in any community. If we take the female population in Lebanon to be around 2 million, and if we apply the commonly used 10% statistic, that means that 200,000 of them are lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. Even if only a small percentage of those actually self-identified as such, we are still left with a large number. Self-awareness of one's sexuality is an important yet overlooked struggle for many women in Lebanon. "Am I really gay?" is a common questioning that is not easily answered. Queer women differ, however, in their opinions of the need to label oneself, although the struggle to do so concerns the large majority of women who deem themselves "lost" as to their sexual orientation. This is partly because of the difficult living conditions of queer women in Lebanon and the automatic presumed heterosexuality. You are heterosexual until proven otherwise.

Coming out is a significant process in a queer woman's life. It involves telling someone else about her sexuality. The significance of this step is that the revelation of this secret will most likely be met with anger and disappointment. The term "come out of the closet" has been adapted literally into Lebanese Arabic "tla3i min il khzeni." Questioning one's sexuality is an integral part of one's search for identity. Social rejection plays a big role in the confusion. The choice of not coming out at all is reflected by a lot of opinions of queer women who don't see the big deal about telling people. But the main reason for coming out is the revelation of one's true self. It is important for queer women to let those close to them know who they really are, who they really love, and how they identify in terms of sexual orientation.

### Coming Out to Parents

The most agonizing coming out experience for queer women in Lebanon is with their parents. The stories in this book reflect varying degrees of

parents' acceptance of their daughter's sexuality. In order to present an idea of the significance of the coming out process, we performed a quick and informal survey of 100 queer women in Lebanon between the ages of 18 and 35. Out of this small sample, 98% agreed that coming out is a significant and difficult process to which they give much thought and deliberation. A very small percentage are out to their parents, which is reflected in only 6 women out of 100 who openly came out to at least one of their parents. That's not counting the women who are indirectly out to a parent. We call it "indirect" because being "out" happens at different degrees and with varying levels. More than half of the women surveyed said they sensed that their parents did indeed suspect or even knew of their sexuality, but chose not to talk about or address it. 62% said they intended to never come out to their parents because they wanted to spare themselves and their families what they anticipate will be a distressful and damaging confrontation. The remaining 32 women said they really wanted to come out to their parents because it was important for them to build an honest and open relationship, but were waiting for the right time to do so. Some were waiting till they had enough financial and personal independence to be able to deal with a harsh or abusive reaction that their parents might have. Many accounts also stated that their family members would demonstrate a tolerant attitude towards homosexuality in general, but the opposite would hold true when they know of their own daughters or sisters being gay.

It is important, however, to make the distinction between coming out as a Western concept and coming out in the context of dominantly patriarchal societies, like Lebanon. The process here is closely intertwined with a sort of rebellious woman's coming out, a feminist coming out. The majority of Lebanese women are expected to want to get married to a man from a background, religion, social class, and family status similar to theirs by their late 20s. Anything outside of this structure is considered an exception to the social norm. According to the different regions, public reaction to such exceptions can consist of anything from a frown



to severe violence. And so, even for heterosexual women who have a different vision of their own lives and ambitions, the battle with society is no less strenuous than that of homosexual women. Women who are sexually active outside of marriage, who don't want to get married, who want to get married to someone from a different religion or ethnicity, who are single mothers, or who want to live alone also face discrimination and prejudice from their families and social circles. Therefore, they face a similar "coming out" process in demanding the freedom and liberty to live the lives they choose instead of a traditional, scripted life.

Marriage  
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Marriage  
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Queer women would generally begin their coming out to their parents with a declaration of "I don't want to get married." Some lesbians begin to use this tactic very early on in their teenage years. Most queer women would stop at that statement and live their entire lives without confronting their parents with their true sexuality. A priority for them is to get out of the duty to get married. Family permission not to get married is a big deal. It is not a granted right. And as queer women approach their late 20s, the pressure to get married from immediate and extended families becomes an overwhelming burden that leads some to depression, emigration, sham marriages to gay men, or, in too many cases, to succumb to a heterosexual marriage and suppress their true feelings, desires, and sexuality.

### Coming Out to Friends

When it comes to friends, however, a very large percentage are out to at least one close friend: 94 out of 100. Many of the women who included a "before and after" angle to their stories in this book spoke about the noticeable change in new Lebanese generations who are more open to respecting homosexuality than those not even a generation older, but even five or ten years older. While the general coming out to close friends experience is positive in Lebanon, many women said that they had lost friends over revealing their sexual orientation.

Globali-  
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### Religion

### Class & religion

Both the institution of religion and religious beliefs play a big role in the lives of queer women in Lebanon. Queer people come from all 18 of our official religious sects. As institutions, religions govern most of our lives including social practices, regional and political divisions, and legal matters pertaining to personal liberties such as marriage, divorce, and custody. The institution of religion in Lebanon, with its laws and regulations, oppresses women's bodies and condemns unregulated sexuality outside marital frameworks as a socially unacceptable form of expression. This form of oppression happens at both the religious institutional level and that of religious public moral opinion.

A common misconception in Lebanon is that Christianity is more tolerant towards homosexuality than Islam. This is based on the visibility of some progressive churches in the West, as well as some Western countries where Christianity is dominant and where anti-discrimination laws protect queer people from harassment. But it does not at all reflect the situation in Lebanon. Our stories covered experiences from all religious sects in Lebanon and the degree of variance in queer acceptance did not correspond to any sectarian divisions. Tradition and public views of morality are often just as powerful as religious texts and institutions, and this is especially true in Lebanon. For the most part, Lebanese public morality bases its refusal of homosexuality as a legitimate form of sexuality on a religious argument: God condemns it. Yet, it is often the religious laws themselves that follow the general opinions of public morality. And it is therefore the people themselves who can be most harsh and homophobic towards queer individuals and communities rather than the institution itself.

Because the politics of Lebanon are irreversibly intertwined with religion, it becomes harder for one to talk about religion as a faith, rather than an institution, and few people are allowed to make this distinction. Civil wars and regional tensions enforce the fanaticism of all sects towards

their own people. This creates huge internal struggles for queer people questioning their sexual identities in light of their faith, and almost all Lebanese queers pass through this challenge. On one hand, one wants to be socially acceptable, and religious devotion is a strong mark of social acceptance. On the other hand, queer people want to live their lives and make their choices in line with their sexuality, and by doing so are seen as rejecting their religious principles.

The battle with personal faith for those who understand the difference between religious institutions and spirituality is no less of a struggle. Many Lebanese queers fear that God frowns upon non-heterosexual desires and behavior. Their sexual identity comes with a lot of guilt, shame, and attempts of repression. This experience is clearly reflected in many of the stories in this book. The outcome of these struggles in some cases is an understanding of God's unconditional love and a reconciliation of faith and sexuality. But in other cases, queer people reject faith altogether and choose to be agnostic or atheist.

### Diaspora Emigration again class

Emigration is a common part of Lebanese culture and queer emigration is particularly high because of the common reasons of economy and opportunity. But it is also high because queers seek a society where they can live comfortably with partners of the same sex. Many young women carry the dream of emigration as a solution to their "problem." They feel that this country cannot accept them as they are, as it frowns upon their expression of love. As you will read in some of these stories, however, these women are attached to their country and to their culture. The more the queer community grows, and the more they experience the support of family and friends, the more these women grow convinced that running away will not solve anything, that there is no dream land out there, and that you may be able to pursue one dream in exile, but you also will lose many others.

Many Lebanese queers falsely believe that queer communities of the West are openly accepting of immigrant queers. The truth is that the progressive tolerant societies that we see reflected in media and laws of European and North American countries do not apply to immigrant people of color, especially Arabs. The rise of Islamophobia and Arabophobia since 9/11 has also played a large role in hatred manifested towards immigrant Middle Eastern communities. So while some Lebanese queers seek emigration as a freedom door towards a queer-friendly society, they are often faced with other forms of discrimination that are just as damaging.

### Relationships with Families

Family ties in Lebanon are the strongest and most important relationships between people today. The Lebanese family structure is very rigidly heteronormative. The way it is traditionally built is the way it should remain, or else people fear that our social fabric will disintegrate. Marriages within families (first or second cousins) as well as within the same village or county remain very common in some areas of Lebanon. For many Lebanese societies, divorce is strongly frowned upon, and no statistics are available on the rates, although it is estimated that the numbers are on the rise in recent years. Unlike Western traditions, children are not expected to move out of their parents' homes when they become adults. On the contrary, it is quite common for men and women to continue to live with their parents until they get married, even throughout their 30's, 40's, and 50's. These factors enforce the familial bonds that constitute the fabric of Lebanese society and make it very difficult for individuals who have desires or feelings outside of these norms to achieve their true selves.

Lebanese family norms are especially important because people rely on them for all kinds of services and support, mostly due to the absence of the public sector, which makes it even harder for Lebanese queers to



distance themselves from their families or risk facing rejection. Therefore, family pressure and the threat of being ostracized remains the single biggest fear facing the queer community in Lebanon. Hundreds of cases of queers being ostracized from their families have been reported in the last 10 years. This form of homophobia manifests itself in different ways: gay men commonly get kicked out of their homes, denied inheritance, or in fewer cases sent out of the country by their parents. Lesbians face different problems with their family and are more likely to get put under house arrest, forced into a marriage with a man, and in some cases do get kicked out of their homes as well. Homosexuals and transsexuals can also be threatened by "honor killings," murders committed by family members against their own relatives for the sake of saving and purifying family pride and honor. Some stories in this book reveal heart-breaking accounts of women and transgenders who faced severe abuse from their families because of their identities.

Families who learn about their children's homosexuality also prefer to hide the shame of this news in their communities and villages, so in many cases they refrain from actively expelling their children, and tighten their restrictions on them instead. Denial probably remains the most common defense mechanism used by Lebanese parents when confronted with their children's homosexuality. A common saying in the queer community is that mothers always know. Often, they get scared and feel a sudden distance from their children, so they choose to deny that homosexuality is even a possibility. What this denial turns into over the years varies from one family to another. Some eventually accept it without really talking about it. Some grow very resentful to it and force their daughters into heteronormative arrangements.

We've tried to come up with a formula or a set of criteria that explains the discrepancies in parents' reactions to their queer daughters coming out. At first, we thought social class and level of parents' education would be an important factor, but it wasn't. Some of the more accepting parents

had little or no formal education, while some of the largely homophobic parents had Master's degrees and PhDs. And since education is automatically tied to class, the stories in this book also dispel the myth that working class parents have a harsher reaction to their children's homosexuality than middle- or upper-class families.

If there is one factor that is common to all women who have had successful and nurturing coming out experiences with their families, it is the nature of the bond between parent and daughter. Women who were already very close to their mothers or fathers, who enjoyed a relationship of openness and trust, were able to sustain this relationship even after they came out.

### Community

Lebanon is heavily split into communities based on religion and social class, and the LGBT community is no different. The most visible queer community is that of a richer social class that mainly works in art, graphic design, fashion, or the entertainment industry. They enjoy a certain freedom and public acceptance associated with their involvement in the arts. Internet access, financial ability to travel, and the English language, also limited to upper and middle classes, are also components of the formation of communities of LGBT, with less information and reports available on the poorer communities. There is also a noticeable visibility and freedom among the younger generations, who find more acceptance among friends than LGBT over 40 do.

When discussing the situation of queer persons in Lebanon, it is important to take into consideration those who practice non-heterosexual sex or pursue same-sex relationships without conforming to queer labels. While this phenomenon exists throughout Lebanon, it is perhaps most prevalent in less urban areas outside the capital Beirut. With the



advancement of an organized LGBT movement in Lebanon, a sense of community grew among the queer people in the country. Once alone and lonely, many queers began meeting people and listening to experiences similar to theirs. The creation of Meem, a support community for lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women, and transgender persons, in August of 2007 brought together hundreds of community members under the banner of solidarity, friendship, and common struggle. Today, we can assume that a lesbian, at least in Beirut, is more likely to have queer friends than she has ever been able to have in the past. But more than the friendships, members often refer to their community as their family. This should perhaps teach us something about the significance of challenging the strict structure of the patriarchal nuclear family, and redefining family as a space for support and nurturing each other.

However, it is important to note that to talk of one over-arching queer community is simplistic. Since queers are such a large and diverse group, perhaps looking at it as a variety of small interconnected communities would be more reflecting of the reality. Still, members who feel that they are a part of a group of other queers seem more likely to express pride in their sexual identity. If the queer community endows its members with a sense of pride and belonging, then activism fills them with a sense of purpose and much hope for a better future in this country. It is not merely for being around and getting to know other queers, then, that many members of Meem and Helem (an NGO for the Lebanese Protection for LGBT) join the organizations, but to be part of a bigger social movement. Many individuals who shared their stories in this book expressed that, through queerness, they were going against many oppressive social systems that contain people in fixed roles and expectations.

### Bisexuality

As in many other countries, the ability of bisexuals to enter into relationships with both sexes proves to be confusing to many people in

Lebanon, whether straight or gay. At times, bisexuals face perhaps even more stigma than homosexuals due to their versatile sexuality. When a bisexual forms a relation with a person from the opposite sex, they are considered heterosexual. When they form same-sex relationships, they are viewed as homosexuals. Some even consider their sexuality as promiscuous. When bisexuals are married to one of the opposite sex, they receive the benefits provided to married heterosexual couples. When in a relationship with the same sex, they're subject to discrimination from both heterosexuals and homosexuals. And so, bisexuals remain outcasts of Lebanese society in most aspects.

### Transgender Issues

While transgenders and transsexuals are often lumped into the "gay" categories of "LGBT," it is very important to understand the distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation as well as that between gender and sex. The issue of sexual orientation is about people loving people of the same gender or sex. It usually has nothing to do with one's own gender identity. But the two different issues are used interchangeably in Lebanon, especially by the popular media and often inside the LGBT community itself. Unfortunate arguments like: "Why does he have to be such a flamboyant queen? He gives homosexuals a bad name; now everybody will think all homosexuals are effeminate" are used by gay men against transgender women, who choose to dress, behave, and live as women. Similarly in the lesbian community, arguments like "Why does she make it harder for herself by looking and acting like a man? She should accept her womanhood. Nobody wants to be with a woman who behaves like a man – otherwise they would be with men" fail to see the very important difference between gender identity and sexual orientation. They are also strongly transphobic statements, equally damaging towards the transgender communities as homophobic statements are towards the gay communities.



A person's sex is the physical anatomy one is born with, whereas gender is every individual's personal identification, be it male, female or any other classification. Sometimes one's gender does not conform to their physical anatomy. There are many problems with gender in Lebanon and in most places around the world. One such problem is gender stereotyping: the idea that there are certain fixed definitions of what a "man" is and what a "woman" is. Another problem are gender binaries: the idea that someone born with a male sex should adhere to a male gender and similarly that someone born with a female sex should adhere to the female gender. Probably the most obvious of these problems is the strict attribution of certain qualities to either "male" or "female," so much so that having qualities that are usually attributed to the opposite gender is often considered abnormal. Take for example "strong," "logical," or even "tall:" male characteristics. Take "sensitive," "emotional," or "beautiful:" female characteristics. It is odd to think of a "logical woman" or "emotional man," although it is more socially acceptable for a woman to have certain limited degrees of masculine characteristics. (After all, who wouldn't want to resemble the almighty "male?" But hey, don't push it.) In contrast, it is more difficult for a man to have any degree of feminine characteristics. (Why on earth would someone want to give up the almighty male characteristics for the lesser feminine qualities? Shame on you!)

Transgender individuals most courageously challenge these gender stereotypes and binaries by outwardly displaying their own choice of gender identity. Transgender individuals who are born male, for example, strongly identify themselves as female and therefore dress, act, behave, and appear as women. Once they make that identification, they should thereafter be referred to as women. Transgender persons may or may not undergo surgical alterations to their bodies, which include hormonal treatment, sex reassignment surgery, and removing or implanting breasts. The term used to identify persons who have gone, or choose to undergo such procedural changes is transsexual. Transgender persons

who do not undertake such measures may still choose to be identified as a member of the opposite sex regardless of their physical anatomy. In many cases, on the other hand, transgender persons choose not to be labeled as the opposite sex at all and prefer the term "genderless" or "gender-queer."

Transgender issues are probably the most invisible in Lebanon and members of this community face stark discrimination both from heterosexual and homosexual communities. Because of this invisibility, many biological females choose to link themselves to the butch lesbian community regardless of their strong sense of identifying with the male gender, passing through life unaware of the option that they may be transgendered. In Lebanon, transsexual operations are allowed after an arduous journey of many years and recommendations by psychiatrists and doctors. The visibility of male-to-female transsexuals is far higher than that of female-to-male transsexuals for the same reason that gay male visibility is a lot higher than lesbian visibility: patriarchy.

For transgenders, the issue of coming out is equally complicated and at times more difficult than for homosexuals or bisexuals. It involves a more visible transformation and gender expression. Many transgender coming out stories have endings that include breaking of family ties, loss of friendships, being fired from a job, or dropping out of school due to social pressure and harassment. It is much easier to be queer in Lebanon if your gender expression passes as the norm. Lesbians who look like standard heterosexual women, for example, are more socially acceptable than lesbians who look like boys. Female-to-male transpersons, however, face harsher reactions and hatred from the public. The road to self-discovery is one that continues far beyond the transperson's adult years. Coming to terms with the basic fact that he or she does not identify with their physical sex is difficult enough in a society where anything outside the norms is unacceptable. When religion is involved, the dilemma is an even greater one, where confronting

religious friends and family members about a "forbidden" identity can result in catastrophic reactions. Transsexuality is viewed as religiously acceptable in Islam as long as it steers away from homosexuality of any sort. And so Muslim transsexuals may have it easier to face extreme believers with their identity. However, regardless of religious acceptance, many people refuse to accept such transition requests from their family members, due to the fact that social acceptance in Lebanon is not limited to religious barriers but traditional ones as well.

As a result, emigration and asylum are the preferred choices of Lebanon's transgender community, hoping to pursue physical alterations to their bodies as well as residence among more accepting societies. The internal transsexual struggle is one that is common all throughout the world, regardless of each person's economic, social, religious or educational levels. The search for acceptance is not always that of social acceptance but rather one of personal acceptance—seeing as many members of the transgender community have difficulties facing themselves with their identity. Such self-esteem issues tend to evolve from society's general approach to transsexuality. And until the transgender community is able to separate itself from the guilt and fear that comes along with transcending norms in a world of social boundaries, the transgender struggle will continue to exist.

### Discrimination

Lesbianism is generally seen to be more "tolerable" in Lebanon than male homosexuality, partly because of the eroticism surrounding the idea of two women together and partly because women remain so marginalized in their communities that lesbians are dismissed as sexually frustrated women who want to maintain their virginity and therefore "practice" sexual play with other women. This tolerance, however, masks multiple layers of discrimination that lesbian and bisexual women face in Lebanon.

Butch women are seen to be imitating male behavior, attire, and ambitions because it is natural for one to want to be like men, who are superior in everything. The term "ikht el rjel" (the sister of men) is commonly used to describe a woman with a strong personality, strong physique, or butch qualities, and is considered a compliment. The term "Hassan sabi" (Hassan boy), the Arabic equivalent of Tomboy, is similarly not a derogatory term, and used to describe young girls who have short hair, dress like boys, play sports, or behave in other ways traditionally attributed to the male gender. Lesbians generally follow the gay men in frequenting gay-friendly pubs and nightclubs.

Violence against homosexuals is normally manifested in the form of physical abuse, rape, blackmail, verbal abuse, job loss, eviction, and other forms. This happens on the street, in restaurants or coffee shops, at work, in schools and colleges, and at home. Several incidents of violence against LGBT have been reported inside the community. Lesbians commonly face verbal abuse and sexual harassment on the street based on their attire, mannerisms, and in case of any minimal public display of affection. However, it is quite common in Lebanon like most of the Arab world for women to walk on the street holding hands or intertwining arms. For men, this is not as common but can still be seen, especially among non-Lebanese Arabs. Common derogatory terms for lesbians include "dakar" (tr. male) or "sharmouta" (tr. whore), or a moving of the tongue gesture.

There are no records or studies on lesbian health in Lebanon, and the common misconception is that lesbians are immune to AIDS and other diseases. Women who have sex with women face stigmatization by gynecologists and are often unable to talk frankly about their sexual health. In terms of mental health, it is still very common for lesbians to seek psychological or psychiatric treatment, (whether willingly or under pressure from their families) and a good number of Lebanese mental health professionals still practice "cure" methods for homosexuals.

Access to  
Health-  
Care  
& Class.  
Again.



### A Brief History of Queer Organizing

Although we suspect that lesbians have always created small clandestine groups of support, the beginning of an organized LGBT movement in Lebanon, as we know it, saw the light with the age of the Internet in the late 90s. An online mailing list was started on Yahoo Groups in 1998, attracting hundreds of LGBT members who remained anonymous online. In 1999, a website called [www.gaylebanon.com](http://www.gaylebanon.com) was launched by the first gay activists in Lebanon and it included information on meeting places, a demand for equality, and the mailing list.

A few years after the virtual community came the founding of ClubFree, an underground LGBT group started by a small number of gay men and women with the mission of providing community support and social activities for the LGBT community. ClubFree rented out an apartment in Beirut with donations from members and used it as a meeting space for discussions and movie screenings. That was when the first ideas for lobbying and advocacy for gay rights in Lebanon started taking a serious turn. ClubFree members would hold small discussion meetings to brainstorm strategies for lobbying with the government. Some ideas and actions that came out of those meetings were sending anonymous letters to members of parliament and the media, as well as building contacts with the International Lesbian & Gay Association (ILGA) and other international bodies.

→ not sure how it is neo-colonialism?  
In 2002, another small group of LGBT activists (some of whom had been part of ClubFree before) registered an NGO called Hurriyyat Khassa (Private Liberties) which aimed to tackle LGBT issues, namely the reform of article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, within and under the umbrella of a larger scope of human rights. Article 534 criminalizes "sexual acts against nature" with up to a year in prison, and is commonly used to target homosexual activity.

In 2004, a group of activists involved in Huriyyat Khassa decided it was time to register a gay and lesbian organization and thus was born "Helem" (an acronym of the Arabic "Himaya Lubnaniya lil Mithliyyeen" tr. Lebanese Protection for LGBT). Helem was first registered in Montreal in 2004 and the members in Lebanon filed an official "zil'm wa khabar" (notification of assembly) at the Ministry of Interior in Lebanon in August 2004. The Lebanese laws governing the registration of non-governmental organization decree that a group of citizens who have assembled to start an organization must notify the concerned ministry by filling in an application of notification with the objectives and mission of the organization. If the ministry does not reject the application within a period of two months, then the organization is considered officially registered and has the right to convene and develop its projects. Therefore, Helem became the first officially registered LGBT organization in the Arab world. The Ministry of Interior today still withholds, however, the license number which is required to open an official bank account and other minor administrative issues. A history of gay activism around the world reveals this as a commonly used strategy whereby governments leave gay organizations in legal limbo for years.

Throughout the history of the LGBT movement itself, the invisibility of lesbians was always noticeable. LGBT communities, after all, mirror the society that they come from. Thus, the sexist oppression of women in Lebanon has spilled over into the queer movement, as has classism, racism, and all other social problems. Lesbians, as a result, especially those of poorer social classes and lesser education, had less freedom, fewer rights, and harsher economic conditions than the gay men and were therefore, with a few exceptions, marginalized in the activist history.

In September 2006, three women members of Helem started a women-only mailing list for LBTQ women and later held the first lesbian-only

meeting in a private home in Beirut on December 16, 2006 with 28 women attending. From this assembly emerged a new lesbian activism that followed with a few meetings in the first half of 2007 and the creation of Meem on August 4, 2007. "Meem" is the letter "m" in Arabic and stands for "majmouaat mou'azarat al mar'a al mithliyya" (tr. support group for homosexual women). The vision of Meem is a better quality of lives for queer women and transgender persons in Lebanon. Working with a low-profile strategy to provide support and services, it seeks to create a strong grassroots movement where women are empowered and can, in the years to come, become more visible in their advocacy work.

Members of Meem meet regularly in the Womyn House in Beirut, a center fully run by volunteers. The House hosts various meetings every week, in addition to workshops, movie screenings, discussions, free counseling services with professional psychologists, and individual support. Through its safeguarding of members' confidentiality and trust, Meem was able to reach out to over 300 queer women and a few transgender persons in Lebanon over the course of one year, and its work has also extended to other Arab cities in the Middle East and North Africa.

### **A Vision for the Future**

We stand at a historical crossroads in the journey for queer recognition in Lebanon. Queer women are finding each other in greater numbers every day and uniting in solidarity. Our battle for full citizenship rights and public visibility is long, but is already powerfully underway. We are organizing and resisting discrimination whether through personal coming out to friends, blogging about our everyday experiences, creating online media, supporting the women's rights movement, or discussing our ideas and thoughts constantly. We've also written this book.

We are the non-conforming sexual community of Lebanon: the lesbians, the bisexuals, the queers, the questioning women, the transgender and transsexual men and women, the Muslims, the Christians, the Druze, the atheists and agnostics, from the North, the South, the Bekaa valley, Mount Lebanon, Beirut, your daughters, your sisters, your mothers, your aunts, your teachers, your students, your employees, your managers, the people you love, and the people who love you dearly. And we shall no longer be afraid.



**BAREED**  
**MISTA3JIL**  
True Stories

...the ... .. especially the ... ..

I feel a ... ..

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SOU7AQIYYEH

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM

... ..

Lesbian is such an ugly word to me. It makes me cringe – especially the French version that is more often used in Lebanon “lesbienne” (with an elongated “leeeen”). Ugh. Even worse was the word “dyke.” But it’s still all good compared to “*sou7aqiyyeh*.”<sup>1</sup> That one really makes me want to vomit. I don’t know if it’s the word itself, or the meaning associated with it, that horrible disgusting image of lesbians in people’s minds was entrenched in my mind too for so long.

I find it intriguing how people form certain images to go with words, how they give absolute meanings to words. When they say the word “lesbian,” it represents a single image in their heads. They have no idea what different and diverse people the word “lesbian” can represent. For my mom, it has one single meaning: “*miSTARjil*.”<sup>2</sup> Lesbians are manly women who wear men’s clothes – and not the cool, trendy men’s clothes, but old-fashioned middle-aged men’s clothes – who speak in deep, aggressive voices and get into fist fights on the street.

So I couldn’t call myself a lesbian. I refused to. I would only say that I am gay. Gay is a much lighter, more positive word. It means happy. It implies freedom. I was always angry when gay women had to be referred to as lesbians.

There’s more and more talk of homosexuality on TV every year – Western TV more so than Lebanese TV. We watch old episodes of “Will and Grace” and “Friends.” We watch news of Ellen Degeneres getting married to her partner, Lindsay Lohan settling down with her new girlfriend. We clap in excitement as Melissa Etheridge kisses her wife before she goes on stage to accept her Oscar. These celebrities enter our daily lives through

<sup>1</sup> A connotatively derogatory Arabic word for “lesbian.”

<sup>2</sup> Manly; like a man.

our televisions. Yet on Arabic channels, all mentions of homosexuality translate into “*shazz*.”

How is society ever going to possibly start thinking about accepting homosexuality as a perfectly natural sexuality when day and night, it is translated on their TV screens as “*shazz*”? Normally, *shazz* would mean deviant, as in “deviant from a rule,” but *shazz jinsliyyan*<sup>3</sup> means pervert to them. You know what I see when I think of the word “pervert” in English? I think of nasty, disgusting older men salivating over little children. So the Arabic version of pervert, i.e. *shazz*, must induce the same image in people’s brains. And I, as a *shazze*, am the farthest thing possible from a nasty, disgusting older man salivating over little children! I am perfectly normal! I look like any typical girl you’d see walking down the street in Beirut. I dress in normal jeans and t-shirts. I fall for cute girls my age who have a witty sense of humor and who talk passionately about books and movies. I get really shy and nervous when I have a crush on someone. I even get shy when I fantasize about someone! I get clumsy when I go out on dates and I never ever make the first move. I have utmost respect for a woman’s boundaries and beliefs. I am anything but a pervert. I’m just a normal, regular, 20-something-year-old woman looking for love and companionship. But when people see me as a lesbian, they see a “*shazze*,” they don’t see any of the things I really am. They see a sexually perverted deviant.

I’ve never actually heard anyone say “*sou7aq*” right in front of me. I’ve only read it in on-screen translations or in articles that usually go something like “*ilwat wa sou7aq*.”<sup>4</sup> *Louti, fhimna*,<sup>5</sup> comes from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Where does *sou7aq* come from? I don’t know. I read somewhere that it is supposed to denote sexual acts between two women in the form of “rubbing,” thus the derivation from the verb “*s7aqa*.” Well, “*s7aqa*” also means “to crush,” as in: “*S7aqa fareeq Korat al qadam al almani nazeeraho al brazeeli 6-0*.”<sup>6</sup> So how in the world

<sup>3</sup> Sexually deviant.

<sup>4</sup> Derogatory terms to mean “gays and lesbians.”

<sup>5</sup> We get it.

<sup>6</sup> The German football team crushed their Brazilian opponents 6-0.



Is the verb "to crush" supposed to signify anything related to a woman loving or making love to another woman? I have had my fair share of sexual experience in my lifetime, but I swear I have never ever crushed (or been crushed by) another woman. So why in the world is the word "sou7aq" supposed to represent who I am?

But you know what's funny? I have such an internalized fear of the word "lesbian" that I get turned off by anyone who uses the word. Yes, I know, it's ironic coming from someone who's a total lesbian, but that is the power of meanings associated with words. It gets inside your brain in weird ways. I am the most non-judgmental person you will find, but when I heard that a lesbian community was getting together to support each other, I immediately thought: "Oh, perverts are getting together to do perverted things." Ridiculous, I know! I'm working on shaking it off and re-claiming the word, but it's so hard sometimes. So yeah, I understand if you are at first disgusted by the word "lesbian." Ditto.

So part of our job as a lesbian community now has to be about re-thinking these terms in Arabic, in Lebanese, and deconstructing the images associated with them. We do need to present the public with alternative words and images. And it's not just terms related to homosexuality. Think of the Arabic word for vagina, for clitoris, for masturbation. Think of Lebanese connotations of the words that identify Sri Lankan, for example. Think of all the Lebanese curse words. Arabic is our language too, and languages are alive. People give meanings to words, and people can change the meaning of words, or invent new words altogether, or simply refuse using offensive words. We need to challenge the dictionary in our heads. I will start with myself:

I am a lesbian.

## SHABB WALLA BINIT?

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM  
GENDER IDENTITY

ACTUAL  
LIVING THE  
LIFE  
RELATIONSHIP  
SEXUAL ORIENTATION  
PERIOD  
COMMUNITY  
SELF DISCOVERY  
EXPRESSION



*Shabb Walla Binit?*<sup>1</sup>

Since I was a little person, I could always hear people whispering around me "*sabi aw binit?*"<sup>2</sup> It started when I was seven or eight and it happens even today at 24. I've always had an indistinguishable gender. I look like a girly boy when I'm among boys and a boyish girl when I'm among girls. I call myself genderless because that's what I really am. I don't like the term transgender: I don't want to be any gender. I want to be genderless.

It's always the children who so boldly and insensitively ask their parents:

"Maaaaaaaa.. hayda binit walla sabi?"<sup>3</sup>

It bothers me so much that when I see little children looking at me, I get all nervous dreading the question I know is coming. They stare me in the eye bluntly and tug at their mother's skirt to ask her what gender I am. I am sure there is some developmental reason why at their age they are so fascinated with knowing who is boy and who is girl, but I don't care! It bugs me!

All throughout my teenage years and until my 20s, I was haunted by that question. I hated it, I loathed it, I would become so incredibly furlous when I heard it – and so embarrassed. The seconds would pass by heavily and slowly as I waited for the parents to answer their children, trying to pretend I didn't hear the question, or that it didn't bother me. But it did and it still does. I avoid children now. I run away from them

<sup>1</sup> Guy or girl?

<sup>2</sup> Boy or girl?

<sup>3</sup> Mommyyyyyy.. is that a boy or a girl?

literally. But it's not just the kids. All sorts of people whisper it behind my back, barely within my earshot. Almost every time I walk down the street or into a restaurant or out of a pub, I hear someone say "*hay shabb walla binit?*" Nobody ever asks it to my face, which must mean that they're not really seeking an answer. It's more of a rhetorical question, probably to express their dissatisfaction with my unclear gender. Why do I have to be clear? Why do I have to conform to something, to a category? What's the big deal about having an unidentifiable gender?

Sometimes I hear someone asking the question behind my back and I turn around and find no one there. I'm starting to imagine voices in my head. That's how deeply it hurts me. It hurts me because it gives me a feeling of shame, of public scrutiny, of being a freak. It bothers me because I feel it violates my body and my soul. It intrudes on my privacy. I feel like I'm being watched all the time, pointed at, laughed at, and as much as I'd like to say that I'm mature enough not to care what people think, it's too much. I don't really care what they think, because I know they think I'm a freak. I just don't want to be helplessly at the mercy of their stares and pointed fingers and smirks. I want them to leave me alone.

People have told me before that I should try looking more like either a boy or a girl, that maybe I should pick a gender and dress like it. But I refuse. I'm not even telling you what sex I was born as.

One day I will get to a point when the question of "*shabb walla binit?*" will not bother me, when I can look someone straight in the eye and reply with something smart and brave that confuses them even further. I want to reply with something like "I don't know" or "neither" or "it depends" or "take a guess" or "are you a boy or a girl?" I'm working on it. One day!

## GAY RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS TOO

DISCRIMINATION

SELF ESTEEM

GENDER IDENTITY

ACTIVISM

COMMUNITY

FAMILY

RELATIONSHIPS

SEXUAL DIVERSITY

PERSONALITY

COMMUNITY

SELF DISCOVERY

EMERATION

Before I knew of any gay activism going on in Lebanon, I used to send anonymous emails to the United Nations Development Programme in Beirut, asking them to deal with gay rights in Lebanon, to make homophobia illegal, and to give gays and lesbians a minimum amount of human dignity. I never got any response. This was back in 2001 or 2002. A few years later, after I had met some Lebanese social activists, and gotten involved with organizations working on democracy and human rights, I asked them about the lack of work on homosexuality as a human right. I always got the same reply: this was not a top priority. Gay rights were just not important.

I have had this same ongoing argument with a friend of mine for many years. Every time something goes wrong in Lebanon, which is—on average—every couple of months, she calls me up and says: “Shift? Which is more important, *this* or gay rights?” When Israel invaded Lebanon in July 2006, when the opposition took over Downtown Beirut in an open-ended sit-in, when the Nahr El Bared war broke out, when hundreds died in Gaza, when natural disasters hit, when we saw beggars on the streets, whenever humanity was threatened in any way, she would remind me that the world is a mess and that people asking for gay rights are entirely selfish and self-centered.

I remember a particular argument that dragged on for hours in a café in Hamra on a Ramadan night. Three of my smartest, most educated, most liberal friends were all trying to convince me that homosexuals are doing fine in Beirut. They are living well, working, partying, having lots of sex, meeting people, and enjoying all the benefits of a good life. “I am all for gay rights, but they aren’t important right now. We can’t and we shouldn’t



be talking about them today. There are far more urgent problems in the country," one of my friends argued. And often, she succeeded in making me feel embarrassed about wanting the rights of homosexuals when Lebanon and the world were going through much worse issues: poverty, hunger, disease, wars, child abuse, sexism, racism, corruption, and so much more. The right to be in love with someone of the same sex seemed altogether too trivial in comparison with the right to food, to shelter, to minimum wage, and to life.

But you know what? I got really tired of feeling guilty about advocating for gay rights, or feeling like my activism doesn't count. I grew up during the Lebanese civil war. I was here when the Lebanese people shot and killed each other based on religion and sect and ethnicity. I was here when rockets blew up my parents' living room, when my cousin was killed during the battles, when my father couldn't find work afterwards and we were broke and hungry for years, living off the charity of family members. I know that I have a right to be protected – especially as a child – from all of these things, but I would trade them all in – all of them – for the right to tell my mother that I am gay, that I am in love with the woman she thinks is my best friend, that I pretend to have boyfriends just to please her.

How basic is that human right, how utterly basic, that everyone takes it for granted as unimportant? Why is it unimportant? Because only a fraction of society needs it? When war strikes in Lebanon, my mother takes care of me, she becomes more loving, she worries about me. But if I told her I was gay, she would resent me, she would hate herself, she would cry for years because she believes it's a sickness and she would think it's her fault. What would I rather face? War or homophobia? I'll take war.

And you know what else? It is completely and utterly false to make the claim that homosexuals are "living the life" in Lebanon. It is true

that some gay people have it well – if they're rich, if they go to private universities, if they have the luxury to travel, if they can read English and have internet access, then yes, maybe they are coping and living well. But they are only a small percentage – a tiny percentage – of the Lebanese gay society. Just like rich and educated straight people are a small percentage of the Lebanese straight society. Homosexuals suffer everything straight people suffer: poverty, hunger, disease, wars, abuse, sexism, racism, corruption. And they also get discriminated against specifically because they are gay. They get beaten up physically, abused verbally, kicked out of jobs, and denied family ties. Many grow up feeling horrible about themselves and feel insecure their entire lives. But that's besides the point.

As a society, as a culture, when we discriminate against someone for being gay or bisexual or transgender, it's because we are afraid of the "other." We hate those who are different from us. We fear what we don't understand, what we consider unnatural. Remind you of anything? It's exactly the same as discriminating against people of other nationalities, other races, against domestic workers, against the poor, against people of other religions, other sects. It's exactly the same as discrimination based on gender. If a straight woman's parents found out she was having sex outside of marriage, they would most likely be terribly abusive towards her, call her a "kafira,"<sup>2</sup> and forbid her from leaving the house. If the same parents found out their daughter were a lesbian, they would do the same thing. It's all connected. When we fight for acceptance and freedom and human rights, we cannot exclude anyone or call one right more important than the other. Human rights are horizontal. They are indivisible, non-hierarchical, and inter-connected.

Gay rights are human rights too.

<sup>2</sup> Skinner

## WHEN MY FATHER DIED

SELF-ESTEEM  
GENDER IDENTITY  
COMING OUT  
FAMILY

My mother still thinks – to this day – that I am gay because my father died and I lost a male role model. In a way, it helped her accept me. People seem to find it easier to accept homosexuality when they can attribute it to some reason. Their immediate reaction is usually *"laz! Leh baddik totlaz! helk?"*<sup>1</sup> implying that there must be something wrong that happened to you. Because, otherwise, if they had raised you correctly, you wouldn't turn out to be a lesbian. Maybe finding the "wrong thing" helps them make sense of it. I remember a Meem discussion group once where someone said she'd like to know every girl's reason for being gay. She said we all become gay because of something that happens in our childhood: abuse, rape, losing a parent, divorce, bad experiences with the opposite sex, or something equally disturbing. I don't believe that's true. It might be the case with some people, but it wasn't for me.

My father died of a heart attack when I was 13. I didn't cry. I wanted to but I couldn't, and I've felt guilty about it ever since. At the funeral, I remember all my relatives telling me: "You have to be strong, you have to take care of your mother, you have to take care of your younger brothers and sisters." Suddenly it became acceptable that I was a tomboy, that my behaviors were boyish. I wasn't really doing things any differently, except that I was always worried about what I should be doing to help my family. I became over-protective, constantly worried, always making sure they were happy, and getting a job when I was still in high school. People called me *"ikht el rjel"*<sup>2</sup> and *"zemli masszouliyyi"*<sup>3</sup> and *"rijjel li belt"*<sup>4</sup> like those were good things now.

In a way, I was relieved. I was happy. It's ironic and sort of sad. But there was always this invisible line that I was not to cross. It was ok for me to

<sup>1</sup> Laz! Why would you turn out like this?  
<sup>2</sup> The sister of men, a term used to signify a strong woman.  
<sup>3</sup> Bearing responsibility.  
<sup>4</sup> Man of the house.



have a strong personality, but I wasn't supposed to argue with the men in my family. It was ok for me to dress like a man, but I wasn't supposed to fall in love with a girl. At some point, I was supposed to switch back to mild, feminine behavior and marry some guy and obey him. Many years passed and that switch didn't happen. But I guess my family got used to me. When I told them I was gay, they weren't really shocked and they didn't question my sexuality or my relationships with women. I know they've all agreed among themselves that it was the circumstances that made me gay. They think that I assumed a male role in the absence of my father, and therefore it was natural for me to identify as a man and, therefore, fall in love with women. In a way, it angers me that they don't fully understand or respect my sexual orientation. It angers me that they don't understand that I don't really identify as a man, and that strength is not a uniquely male characteristic. Women are strong too. But in other ways, I figure at least they don't bother me about it. If pity makes them accept me, then I'll take pity.

I wonder all the time how my life would have turned out if my father were still alive, how our entire family dynamic would have been different. I am very sure he would have been enraged by my homosexuality and that neither my mother nor my siblings would have accepted me. I know he would have forced me into a dress and into a marriage. I felt horribly selfish that I benefited from his death and that I didn't miss him. I felt that I needed to apologize to him, but I dismissed these thoughts for years, refusing to deal with them.

Almost twelve years after my father died, I went through a very difficult break-up with my girlfriend of five years. I cried my heart out over her. I cried for days and nights and couldn't stop. And the more I cried the more I realized that I was really crying over myself, over my broken life, over my mother's suffering, over the years I lost growing up too fast. And for the first time ever, I was crying over my father.

## MY BISEXUALITY

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM

COMING OUT

COMING OUT

COMING OUT

RELATIONSHIPS

SEXUAL DIVERSITY

COMING OUT

COMING OUT

COMING OUT

COMING OUT

I don't mind labels. On the contrary, I spent almost half my life trying to label myself. I have gone from calling myself straight to lesbian to bisexual to lesbian to bisexual more times than I can remember in the past 10 years. Although I never liked people labelling me, it was still very important for me to give a name, a category, an identity of sorts to myself.

I don't care for people who say that labels are not important and that we're all bisexual. It was important for me to know what and who I was. I needed to define myself, to assert myself, to find myself, to understand myself, and I couldn't do that without some sort of framework.

The plain and simple truth is that I am attracted to both men and women. No, I'm not attracted to everyone on the planet. No, I am not obsessed with sex. No, it doesn't mean I like to be with men and women at the same time. It tires me to answer society's countless questions about bisexuality because I toiled so hard with them myself.

Growing up in a middle-class family in Beirut, my childhood was somewhat uneventful. I've always had a great (and somewhat equal) relationship with both my parents. As a kid, I developed crushes on boys like all the girls in my classroom. At 14, I had my first official boyfriend in school. He was two classes older than me and he played basketball on the school team. We were one of those popular "cute" couples. Being such a young couple, our physical relationship developed very slowly. Two months after we dated, I kissed him. Six months after that, we were touching each other with our clothes on. I was always comparing notes

(as all straight girls do) with my other friends who had boyfriends, just to make sure I was being neither too uptight nor too easy. My progress checked out with everyone else's. Right about that time, I met a girl who changed my life. I tell her now that she "awakened me to my life."

I played basketball too but I wasn't all that good at it. It was the height of the Lebanese basketball craze of the late 90s. Our school hosted another school one Friday afternoon for a girls' basketball game. The court was almost empty except for a few players on each team. Not enough girls had shown up on the other school's side, so they had to forfeit the game, but hung around for a while to shoot some hoops with our players. The first time I laid eyes on her, I thought she was a boy. She dribbled and jumped around more gracefully and naturally than I had ever seen a girl do before. "*Haydi binit?*"<sup>1</sup> I asked someone next to me. "*Mish maarouf,*"<sup>2</sup> she said. "*Bit3azzid*"<sup>3</sup> I found myself saying. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I felt a strange thump in my chest like I had discovered a treasure or met my life-long friend again after decades of separation. It felt just like falling in love. But of course, that option didn't even cross my mind back then.

I waited for her to go to the water taps at the other, quieter end of the playground and followed her quickly.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said back.

"*Keefik?*"<sup>4</sup> I asked, as I watched her stoop over to drink, her sweat dripping down her neck.

"*Mne7a,*"<sup>5</sup> she replied, straightening back up and looking straight at me inquisitively.

<sup>1</sup> Is that a girl?  
<sup>2</sup> It's not clear.  
<sup>3</sup> She's amazing.

<sup>4</sup> How are you?  
<sup>5</sup> Good.



We started chatting. I don't remember exactly what small talk I made to get us talking. All I remember was that I couldn't control the excitement buzzing in my heart. We exchanged phone numbers under the pretense that I wanted to join whatever basketball club she played in at the time.

For weeks after that, we would talk regularly on the phone for hours about everything and nothing. Thinking back, we were totally flirting with each other, but did not define it as such at the time. I found myself missing her and wanting to spend every minute I could with her. But for months, I only acknowledged it as having found my best friend. One summer day, over ice-cream, she told me – out of the blue, without any introductions – that she was gay. A huge smile appears on my face and I feel extremely embarrassed. “*3am ti7ki jadd?*”<sup>6</sup> I ask her, only trying to buy myself a minute to compose myself. Then I laughed and said I was cool with that. I suddenly realized that I always knew she was gay and it was a huge part of the reason I was so attracted to her. “And I’m in love with you,” she added. Again, I laugh to hide my nervousness. “Hal marra akeed *3am tistilmeeni*,”<sup>7</sup> I said. My heart was thumping really hard. She asked me what I was thinking and I gave neutral responses, expressing neither excitement nor resentment. In my heart, I had no clue what I was feeling.

A month later, we had kissed and made out and said “I love you” to each other. And all throughout, day and night, I couldn't stop thinking about why I loved her. I wondered if I was gay too, and part of me thought that was impossible. And all this time, I was still with my boyfriend. After the excitement of my first month in a lesbian relationship came the agony of confusion. I was torn between my two selves – radically different, yet strangely the same. I decided to break up with my boyfriend in order to “test” my sexual orientation. And so I dove into a lesbian relationship wholeheartedly yet cautiously.

<sup>6</sup> Are you serious?

<sup>7</sup> This time I'm sure you're pulling my leg.

At the end of that relationship, I found myself without any revelations about sexual preference. I couldn't measure the two relationships against each other. Who did I love more? Who was I happier with? I had no answers to these questions. The only answer that I could find was that I was bisexual. And the idea terrified me. I had grown up around straight people, and had met a lot of gay people during my lesbian relationship, but I had never come across any bisexuals. The only bisexuality I had heard of was one that gay people made fun of.

“*Hayda 3emilli 7alo bisexual*,”<sup>8</sup> I would hear a gay man say about a bisexual.

“*Haydi btit-hayyaj 3ala kill shee*,”<sup>9</sup> someone would remark about a woman.

Most of all, bisexuals were “those people” who were confused and unable to accept themselves. I think the straight world is kinder to bisexuals than the gay world is.

So I battled with the thought that I was deluding myself – from what exactly, I did not know. I worried about where I would fit in. I struggled with coming out as a bisexual woman (ironically more so to my gay friends than my straight friends). I looked up resources online and knew that the “B” was acknowledged in “LGBT” discourse. I just didn't feel the acknowledgement from my gay friends. When I talked to some of them about it, they treated me like a traitor and belittled my sexuality. They said I would grow out of it.

As I grow older, I am able to assert myself better as a bisexual. I meet men I like and I meet women I like. It's not that I am out of control, chasing every man and woman that I meet. I am – just like you – looking for the right life partner for me. The only difference is that they might turn out to be any gender.

<sup>8</sup> That guy's pretending to be bisexual.  
<sup>9</sup> That girl gets horny over everything.

## BECOMING

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM

ACTIVISM  
COMING OUT  
FAMILY

RELIGION  
COMMUNITY

I was born in 1982.

Growing up in a Maronite family, I was a very religious teenager. I read the Bible three times a day. In the morning, I would read inspiring verses from the Psalms. After school, before doing my homework, I would read a passage from the Gospels, and before I went to bed, a passage from the Letters. I loved the Bible. It gave me strength, hope and joy. I wanted to be a missionary when I grew up, and even at a young age, I was a passionate preacher.

At the same time, I knew I was gay since I was six years old. Back then, I defined myself as different. I was a typical tomboy, always hanging out with boys, making fun of girls, cutting my hair really short, and refusing to wear a *fostan* or a *skarbeen*<sup>1</sup>. I told people to call me "Paul" (like the Apostle) and they did. As a kid, it was never a problem. My parents loved me, my friends loved me, and I did great at school. I played the piano, I played a lot of sports, I wrote sappy poetry, I read 10 books a month, I told everyone that I had a crush on this girl or that girl, and everybody thought it was cute. And my favorite thing in the world for seven years was Girl Scouts. I went camping every chance I could, putting more effort into scouting than I did anywhere else. My homosexuality, although I didn't have a name for it, never seemed unnatural to me. It was the most natural, most normal part of my being.

Then came that summer between Grade 6 and Grade 7, where all the girls suddenly return to school wearing bras, legs waxed, eyebrows plucked, and all the boys come back to school taller, with deeper voices

<sup>1</sup> Dress or girly shoes.



and facial hair. Suddenly, it was no longer about girls vs. boys. It was about girlfriends and boyfriends. My classmates changed. They started telling me that I should "*Itbannat shwal*"<sup>2</sup> and go out with a guy. I would laugh and call them ridiculous and say, "*Aslan ana b7lbb il banet.*"<sup>3</sup> Some dismissed me as childish. My close friends were very respectful and accepting. They had known me most of my life, and they didn't judge me. The only advice they gave me was to stop announcing it to people because it would cause me problems. Problems? I thought. Why would it be a problem? This is how I am. I honestly did not believe that homosexuality was a problem. It was just so natural to me and I was sure it wasn't a problem.

But I took their advice and kept quiet about it. I didn't change my looks or behaviors, however. I liked my boyish looks and clothes, and nobody around me seemed to have a problem with it. People mostly attributed it to my personality. "*3am bitrakkiz 3a darsa ou 3al activities, ma bela bil msa7abl.*"<sup>4</sup> And I felt accepted.

As the months passed, however, I became increasingly uncomfortable in my surroundings. Parties were not fun anymore; they became about girls and boys flirting and making out. Events and special functions became about girls dressing up in fancy clothes and makeup. It became a battle for me to fit in. I grew sadder and less secure about myself. I was rejected as a freak by the girls I liked. My mother grew impatient with my tomboy phase. "*Ma 7allik titghayyari?*"<sup>5</sup> she said. But she still loved me and did everything she could to make me happy. She was an elementary teacher at the school I went to, and always took great pride in my scholastic achievements. My father lived and worked in the Gulf, and only came to spend a month with us every summer. My mom raised me and my sister by herself. I was the light of her life and I was extremely, incredibly attached to her.

<sup>2</sup> Act more like a girl.

<sup>3</sup> Actually I like girls

<sup>4</sup> She is focused on her studies and activities. Relationships are the last thing on her mind.

<sup>5</sup> Isn't it about time you changed?

Then, at 14, came the shock of my lifetime. During my daily Bible readings, I came across a passage in Romans 1, a passage that would haunt me for years:

*"For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.*

*And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them."*

I read and re-read the passage, hoping every time that I had misread something. But there it was, staring me in the face. I got my Arabic Bible and looked up the verses there and they said the same thing: God gave them up. "*Aslamahom Allah.*"

I was terrified and deeply ashamed. I was shocked by the idea that God had given me up because I loved women. How could that be? It didn't make any sense. Why would God give me up? I was obsessed with the idea that I would receive "in [myself] the penalty of [my] error." My life

was doomed for misery, I thought. But what had I done that was so bad? How could I be wicked and covetous and malicious and murderous and evil-minded? I was none of these things. Could it be that I was fooling myself and that this was what God really thought of me?

I panicked. I cried. I could not pray. I hid my Bible away. I felt doomed. God had given up on me. For weeks, it was all I could think about, and inside me, I knew there must be a mistake. Something must be wrong. It was impossible that I was a bad person and that God wouldn't love me. Why would the Bible say something so horrible?

A short while later, I received the answer to my torturous questions. By what I believed was God speaking to me, I came across an episode of the "Al-Shater Yizki" show on LBC with Dr. Ziad Njelm. It was about homosexuality. Gay men were sitting in the studio with masks on their faces or as shadows behind curtains. And guests included psychologists, sociologists, lawyers, and men of different religions. Most of the show was very negative, and the gay men guests were shouted at, called perverts and pedophiles, and mocked. And then one of the priests spoke. Through tears of joy, I heard him say that homosexuality was normal, and that Christianity was tolerant of gay people. He said the story of Sodom and Gomorrah was misinterpreted as anti-gay, but that it was really about a society that lived without laws, without humanity, without spirituality.

The other priest mocked him and said: "If you approve so much, why don't you become homosexual yourself?"

He replied, still smiling, "No, I cannot become a homosexual, just like a homosexual cannot become heterosexual." He was peaceful and calm and he changed my life. I was overcome with joy. I still wish today, 12 years after that episode, that I could find him and thank him and give

him a big hug. I rushed to get my Bible and looked up the same passage again. Of course! I exclaimed. Of course God would not give me up! Of course I am not evil!

I became happy and confident again. I was still having a hard time fitting in with my school's social setting, but I coped well, mostly using humor. I joked and laughed and studied and went camping. And I continued to read my Bible.

And then, when I was 16, I did the one thing that I would regret for the rest of my life. Naively and without thinking, I was talking to my good friend, the school's Bible teacher, and I told him that I had struggled with my homosexuality and faith. His face turned white. "What?" he said. "Yes, but don't worry," I assured him. "I am fine now, I know that God loves me the way I am." "What?" he said again, "what do you mean the way I am?" "I am a homosexual," I said, wondering why he wasn't congratulating me on my amazing achievement.

"No," he said, "homosexuals are sinners. God hates homosexuals."

"No, He doesn't," I replied.

He got up and paced around the room. He looked panicked, like he had suddenly been struck with a deadly disease. "No, no, no," he kept saying. "Ma biseer, haydi mishkli kteer kbeeri. Get out of my office. Mamnou3 baza tiji 3al Bible study."<sup>6</sup>

"But... I can't not come... I want to be a missionary," I said.

"Khalas! Tlazi la barra!"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> That's impossible! This is a huge problem. You can't come to Bible study anymore.

<sup>7</sup> Enough! Get out of here!



Within an hour, he had told the Principal, the supervisors, and the teachers. And if you remember, my mother was a teacher at my school.

During the ride back home that day, she said nothing, not a word, but she had a horrible frown on her face. She wouldn't even look at me. I understood immediately that the Bible teacher must have told her something and that it was going to be a big problem.

At home, I heated up a plate of spaghetti to have lunch in the kitchen, when my mother suddenly had a nervous breakdown. She started breaking plates and glasses on the floor, screaming "*Keef btazimil heik fiyyi?? Mannik tabeeziyyi... 3millit kill shee kirmelik... tlo3ti wi7di woskhal*"<sup>8</sup> My heart sank and I was shaking and tears ran down my face as I sat there motionless. Glassware was breaking around me and food was flying over my head. It was the first time in my life my mother yelled at me or called me names.

"*Oumi footi 3a oudtiki*"<sup>9</sup> she screamed, grabbing me by the hair and dragging me to my room. It was the first time in my life my mother physically hurt me. She banged the door shut and locked me in. For hours, I cried like I had never cried in my life. I could not stop crying. Through the door, I could hear her crying and screaming and breaking things.

How horrible, I thought, that I had humiliated her so terribly at school. How horrible I was. I felt like the biggest disappointment in the world.

In the evening, she barged through the door and dragged me into the bathroom. She had filled the tub with hot water and something — I don't know what. She stripped me of my clothes and shoved me into the tub. "*Fee shee mish tabee3i feeki, wi7di woskha, baddi inza3ik hone la tondafi*,"<sup>10</sup> She locked the bathroom door and I sat in the tub

still crying, for three hours. *Tash-sheit*<sup>11</sup> over the hours. I thought of drowning myself in the tub. I tried to hold my breath under the water, but I couldn't. I wanted to die. My life was over, I thought. I wanted to die. My mother finally opened the door and told me to get out and go back into my room. She was calmer, but still angry and sad. She told me they had kicked me out of school, out of Bible study, out of Girl Scouts, out of the basketball team, out of everything, and that I would remain locked in my room forever.

For 12 days, I stayed in my room. My mother didn't say a word to me. She would open the door only to drop in a Picon sandwich or to tell me to get into the tub again. I stayed in bed for 12 days, doing nothing but crying and eating Picon sandwiches. I was starving and weak. I think now that she must have thought something was physically wrong with me, and she thought she would treat it with Picon sandwiches and hot baths. But I was never angry at her; I was angry at myself for hurting her so badly. During those two weeks, she took me to the family doctor for a medical checkup. "*Shifli shou bihal binit, mareeda*,"<sup>12</sup> she said to him. He checked me and ran tests, and nothing out of the ordinary came out. She took me to a priest, who talked to me for an hour about masturbation and drugs and the horrors of sex before marriage. She took me to an old man, who I think was a psychiatrist, who prescribed pills for me. I don't know what they were, but I gained 30 kilograms over a couple of months. This whole time, I was like a zombie. I said nothing. I just stared blankly in front of me, and went wherever my mother took me.

On the 13th day, she woke me up at 7am and told me to get ready for school. "I don't want to go," I said. "Get up!" she screamed.

And so I went back to school. The first day was horrendous. They had placed my seat at the back of the classroom, away from everyone else. I was not allowed to interact with anyone. My classmates were baffled,

<sup>8</sup> How can you do that to me? You're not normal. I did everything for you. You turned out to be a bitch.

<sup>9</sup> Go to your room.

<sup>10</sup> There's something abnormal in you, you dirty girl, I will soak you here till you're clean.

<sup>11</sup> My skin wrinkled up.

<sup>12</sup> See what's wrong with my daughter; she's sick.

but my friends had figured out what happened. In the playground, I was not allowed to sit with anyone. The supervisors were monitoring me and asked me to sit alone. My friends, of course, thought that was ridiculous and came and sat with me. They got yelled at but didn't care. "They told us you were sick," my friend said to me. "What happened? No one would tell us anything. We called you at home and your mom kept saying you were sleeping and asked us to stop calling." I didn't say anything. There were tears in my eyes. "We protested for days," she told me. "We went down to the Principal's office and demanded that we talk to you. He kept repeating that you were sick. What happened?"

"My mother hates me," I said. They were silent and stopped pushing me for answers.

"They can't do this to you," one of them said. "We will not allow it. What are they going to do? Expel all of us?" After recess, eight of my classmates moved their seats to the back of the class to sit beside me. The teachers complied. It was the first time I felt empowered by group support and solidarity. For the entirety of the school year, my friends' love and compassion carried me through, as I faced mockery, disgust, verbal abuse, and physical violence from everybody around me.

I managed to get through graduation and make it to college. The years passed and my mother wouldn't talk to me. I mean we spoke to each other, but we never really talked. As time passed, she got less angry and more sad. I've learned to cope with it and to forgive her for everything. I've learned that it was only out of love that she did what she did. I've learned that she was really worried about me being unhappy and dealing with society's homophobia. I've learned that she has only ever loved me just the way I am. But the hardest thing to unlearn was the overwhelming feeling of disappointing those I loved. That stayed with me till this very day.

I've learned that organized religion only wants to control people, and that the only true message of any faith is love. No matter how much hatred people throw at you, you just say thank you and give back love. I've learned that with good friends by your side, you can overcome anything. Nine years after my friends stood up to the school administration to demand my right to equal treatment, I started a lesbian support group called Meem, based on the same principles of solidarity and friendship. And that little tomboy who wanted to be a missionary is now an activist for social justice. Every single day, I fight for peace, love, and gender equality. I grew up to be exactly what I always wanted to be.



## MY BEST FRIEND

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM  
GENDER IDENTITY

*Haydol Mannon Bashar<sup>1</sup>*

I cannot tell my best friend that I am gay. She completely rejects homosexuality as abnormal.

I met her during my first year of college, where we were both journalism majors. We became best friends almost instantly and remained so for six years. We agree and support each other in everything, except of course, when it comes to my sexual identity. The tension started during our 4<sup>th</sup> year at university, when working on our final project: a university magazine.

For the feature story, I chose to write about homosexuality. I thought it would make for a good, strong subject, but my ulterior motive was to meet other homosexuals in a safe setting. I knew they existed and I had heard about Helem, but I didn't have the courage to approach them as a lesbian because I was still very uncomfortable with my sexuality. I didn't know if I was really one of them or "*lza bi'isso mitil ma ana bi'iss.*"<sup>2</sup> It was my excuse to get to know the "*jaw*" – the "*atmosphere.*"

My friend didn't mind my choice of topic, but was worried that the university would object. So I didn't ask anyone for permission at first. I worked hard on the article, visiting Helem and interviewing some of its gay and lesbian members. I also talked to Muslim and Christian clergymen and to a psychiatrist. I was trying to be as objective as possible so that I was safe and covered. When I presented the piece for my professor, he loved it and it got published. But my best friend didn't. She became very resentful.

<sup>1</sup> They are not human beings.  
<sup>2</sup> If they feel like I feel.

She asked me repetitively why I had chosen the topic of homosexuality. I gave her lots of reasons / excuses, mainly that it was new and bold, that it would get us extra points, that we already had a gay rights organization in Lebanon. She shunned all my excuses with homophobic remarks and then asked me if I was a homosexual too. I denied it immediately and laughed it off. Deep inside, I was extremely hurt that my closest friend in the world was homophobic; my closest friend in the world couldn't really know me.

So I struggled alone, with no one to talk to about my sexuality. I had added the lesbian I met at Helem on my MSN and talked to her frequently, while still disguising myself as straight. After a few weeks, the need in me to talk to someone grew, and I finally told her. She was extremely understanding and supportive. We met a few times and she introduced me to other lesbians and to Meem, where I found such a warm and caring group of people who accepted me the way I was for the first time in my life. Slowly but surely, I started to get comfortable in my skin.

At around the same time, my best friend told me that rumors were spreading at university about me being a lesbian. "*Mish zarfi shou zam yin7aka?*"<sup>3</sup> she said, "Everybody is saying that you're a lesbian, and that I'm your girlfriend." I laughed and said: "Who cares what people think?" She seemed extremely annoyed. I started to doubt that it was her strategy of finding out if I was gay.

Her behavior changed. She was bothered by everything I did. Whenever we touched or hugged, I could feel her getting uncomfortable. So one day, I initiated the conversation and asked her if she thought I was a lesbian. She said no. After a brief silence, she added: "But everybody's talking about you at college. You cut your hair, you look different, you're acting differently." I told her I was exactly the same person I have been

<sup>3</sup> Don't you know what's being said?

for the past four years. Then she asked me about my other friend, a man, who has effeminate mannerisms. I had always suspected that he was gay, but I never asked. "Are you in love with him because he looks and acts like girls?" she asked. Again, I diffused her questions with humor and explained patiently that he was a good friend of mine, and that I didn't mind if he were gay.

She said to me (in these exact words): "If you're a lesbian, let me know, because I'm homophobic. I don't accept having a friend who's *heik*."<sup>4</sup>

I immediately told her I was not a lesbian, my heart breaking a little at her words. Later, I made up a fictitious guy and claimed to have a crush on him. It went on like this for two years. Every once in a while, she would bring up the topic again. I was making lots of new lesbian friends through Meem, but I never introduced her to them. Every time I mentioned someone's name, she'd ask me if she was a lesbian. It was suffocating.

What kills me is that she is an incredibly loyal and supportive friend. We have always been by each other's side in everything. We've never fought over anything. It is only my secret homosexuality that contaminated – and still contaminates – our friendship. If only I could tell her, I thought, if only she would be supportive, if only she could know me for who I really was. But that is impossible.

She gets upset and jealous of my friends. She keeps saying that we are drifting apart, that I am abandoning her and keeping secrets from her. She doesn't (or refuses to) understand what is happening. One time, she called me abnormal. Then one day, during our arguments, I asked what she would do if I were a lesbian. She flamed with anger and scolded me and cursed me: "Why would you be like this? *Ahlik rabbouki. Starji kouni heik*."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Like this.

<sup>5</sup> Your parents raised you better, don't you dare be like this.



"Whatever you say, you cannot convince me," she went on, "*Haydol mannon bashar*."<sup>6</sup>

How can I tell her? I keep joking it off. I lead a double life. In my lesbian community, I am myself. With my family and friends, I am straight. I talk about men just to please them. It's frustrating, but it's the double life I have to lead. I lie, I camouflage, I pretend. I can't even tell my best friend. She thinks homosexuals are not human beings. I want to tell her that she should love me unconditionally, that I am a human being. But I can't right now. I can't and I don't know if I will ever be able to.

<sup>6</sup> Those people are not human beings.

## THE HUNT FOR A GAY HUSBAND

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM  
GENDER IDENTITY  
ACTIVISM  
LIVING OUT  
FAMILY  
RELATIONSHIPS  
SEXUAL IDENTITY  
RELIGION  
COMMUNITY  
SELF-DEVELOPMENT  
EMERGENCY

The social pressure against lesbians in Lebanon is tremendous. There's no escaping it. People don't look at you as an individual. They quickly define you by your family, your job, your political affiliation, your religion, your village. I think that when they know you are a lesbian, they become confused. It doesn't fit into any of these social constructs. My younger cousin got married last year and she recently said to me: "My wedding was not about celebrating the love between my husband and I. It was one big celebration of our religion, family, social status, and village." I feel that if I didn't get married – being the only daughter of my parents – I would deprive my family of that celebration, to which they feel morally and rightfully entitled.

Behind this typical Lebanese scene is the real me: a 27-year-old lesbian in love with a woman everyone thinks is my best friend. We've kept our relationship extremely hidden; there is not a single person in the world who knows about us. I wonder what it's like for people to introduce their partner to others. I've dreamt about saying to people: "This is my girlfriend, the light of my life" or "this is my better half." I've always loved that last one. But I have never experienced the joy of expressing my love to others. We've kept it well-guarded in our hearts.

And yet the pressure of marriage grows exponentially every day. With every passing social occasion, my entire family (and I come from a big family) asks me when I am going to get married and fixes me up with eligible bachelors. I cannot stand the guilt of shaming my mother in front of all those relatives if I pass my 30th birthday without getting married. It might sound trivial to some, but it's the reality of my life. I cannot live knowing I've caused my parents that much sadness after all they've

done for me. And there is no way – absolutely no way – I can tell them that I am a lesbian and that I would gladly get married to a woman. No way.

And so, I decided last year that I would indeed get married, but to a gay man. I had heard of the idea before: gay men marrying lesbians, otherwise known as "beards." I laughed at the idea of being a beard and thought I would never put myself through such a hassle. But suddenly it became the right solution to my problem. I will find a gay man, agree with him on a sham marriage, satisfy my family, and maintain my loyalty towards my girlfriend, who is my real-life partner. She doesn't like the idea very much. She doesn't understand that it's the only choice I have. I wish things could be any other way; I wish with all my heart. But this is my life.

It's been close to a year that I've been literally hunting for a husband, trying to find someone who is in a similar situation and needs the same cover-up I do. My search has not been very successful, mainly because I don't have that many gay friends, and because I haven't found a man who fits my qualifications yet. Ironically, he needs to be "presentable" to my family and definitely of the same religious sect. It goes against everything I believe in, but I'm still convinced that it's my only solution. Otherwise, I'd have to marry an unknowing straight man and spend my life hiding my gayness and true love. I don't want to do that. I want to be honest.

Who am I kidding? I can never live an honest life. It's sad. But I have no other choice. You do what you can to hurt the least number of people around you.



## THE LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP MYTH

DISCRIMINATION  
 SELF-ESTEEM  
 GENDER IDENTITY  
 ACTIVISM  
 COMING OUT  
 FAMILY  
 RELATIONSHIPS  
 SEXUAL DIVERSITY  
 RELIGION  
 COMMUNITY  
 SELF-DISCOVERY  
 EMERGENCY

The common misconception in Lebanon is that lesbian relationships don't last. Here's the Insider's guide to a stereotypical Lebanese lesbian relationship. Two women meet (probably online), fall in love within a week (if not faster), vow eternal love and devotion to each other (forever and ever), meet in person (probably at Dunkin Donuts), announce that they are girlfriends (*zayeti inti!*), tell all their friends (including lesbians on their MSN they have never met) that they are now in love, go dancing In Acid a month later (where one of them will throw a jealousy fit because the other looked at someone else), start fighting about everything (and nothing), break up (over the course of six months), and finally decide to become good friends (lesbian ex's never leave). Repeat as necessary.

Ok, so maybe that really does happen a lot. But it's not because there's something inherently wrong with lesbians in this country. It's because these are the patterns that social pressure and ostracism lead to. Imagine growing up for years thinking there is something seriously wrong with you, being rejected by your parents and friends, believing you're the only lesbian in the world, observing and envying all the heterosexual relationships around you. Of course you're going to jump into a relationship with the nicest lesbian you can meet. Of course you're going to carry into that relationship years of insecurity, low self-esteem, and hopelessness, in addition to all the external battles with society that you have to fight. Remember all those romantic comedies with a woman searching many years for Mr. Right (among all the men in the universe)? Imagine being in the same situation, only you barely know 10 other lesbians from which you're supposed to find Miss Right.

But then what happens is that the "Lesbanese" society takes refuge in the proclaimed theory that all "Lesbanese" relationships are short-termed and doomed and start replicating the same patterns. You might have guessed that I know so much about this because I've been in these cycles a few times myself. But all of that changed when I met a certain special Lesbanese.

I tagged along to a New Year's party near Hamra organized by some gay friends of my gay friend. I had nowhere else to be that last night of 2004, and after his persistent nagging, I thought I'd go for a couple of hours, watch the clock tick midnight and then leave. When I got there, I actually found myself having a lot of fun. I danced with the gay men, who are always so fun to dance with, and felt welcomed and among friends. A little after the clock stroke midnight, after I had hugged absolute strangers and wished them a Happy New Year, she walked into the living room, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Apparently, she was also dragged by her gay friend and had little intention of being at the party. As is customary at such gatherings, the gay men always introduce the tiny minority of lesbians to each other. She shook my hand and asked me: "Shou? Ma fee banet?"<sup>2</sup>

"Nope," I shrugged, "mnee? Jeetl Intl,"<sup>3</sup> and smiled at her.

For the four hours that followed, we danced and joked and drank wine. We talked about music and work and coming out. Four years later, we are still doing the same. It's been a fairytale love story. We never once broke up. We work hard on being honest, loving, giving, and understanding. We finally moved into an apartment together under the pretense that we are roommates who need to live closer to our jobs. We alternate spending weekends with our families. I've met most of hers and she's met all of mine. "Mitl il mjawwazeen,"<sup>4</sup> my mother told me once. "A?san bl kteer,"<sup>5</sup> I thought to myself.

<sup>2</sup> What's up? There are no girls here?

<sup>3</sup> It's a good thing you came.

<sup>4</sup> You're like a married couple.

<sup>5</sup> We're a lot better.

I love her so much. In four years, I have not once been bored of her or more interested in anyone else. She's vibrant and passionate and kind. We've made a lot of friends along the way. We don't have any lesbian couple friends who've been together as long as we have, but we've met a few great couples along the way. We settled immediately into an unspoken agreement that we wanted to spend a lifetime together. She is my best friend, and I can't wait to spend forty more years with her as my partner.

Of course, we've had our share of problems and challenges. Who hasn't? Over the years, I've come to realize that the really scary problems have very little to do with us being a lesbian couple. Of course, we both battle with our parents about not wanting to get married to men. We are not out to everyone (although our circle of supportive straight friends is growing). We can't take each other to family functions and company events. We wonder about what we're going to do when we get to a stage where we really want to have children. But none of these are as scary as the internal problems we face. Learning to trust each other has been an issue. The insecurity of "ba3da bit7ibbn?"<sup>6</sup> is always there. Both of us have had crushes on other people. We're deeply in love, but sometimes we just can't stand each other. We struggle financially and spiritually all the time. But again, who doesn't? I find myself having very in-sync conversations with my straight friends all the time. My straight friend who's been in a relationship with a man for three years understands me perfectly well when I say that compromise vs. sacrifice is always something we struggle with. She knows exactly what I mean when I say I don't like one of my girlfriend's close friends. I too understand her when she talks about her parents not fully approving her boyfriend. We both hide our level of sexual activity from our families.

So when it comes to personal, internal challenges, lesbian relationships are no different from heterosexual relationships. In a lot of ways, we're surprisingly just like everyone else.

<sup>6</sup> Does she still love me?



## WETNESS

### SELF-ESTEEM

### SELF-DISCOVERY

What I remember most about sex education in school was a horrible video, decades old, with a little girl running to her mother in tears because she got her period and she was confused. The mother then explains to her in a matter of five minutes (and in a regretful tone) that periods signify a gift of honor from God to girls and that they must now become "women." Just like that — in five minutes.

At that time, I had not gotten my period yet and I wondered what being a "woman" felt like. I dreaded the thought. I wanted, somehow, to escape growing up into a woman because, in my head, it meant that I would have to shave my legs and grow boobs and put on makeup. I didn't want to do any of that. Of course, they showed that video to girls only, and it was followed by girls-only meetings with the teacher, which I loathed.

The teacher spoke in codes I couldn't understand, talking ambiguously and sharing laughs with only a few girls in the classroom who seemed to understand what the fuss was about. She said that periods smell, that if you have your period, everyone can smell you, so you have to change your pads and clean yourself many times a day. I was horrified at the idea of people smelling me and felt embarrassed. It's been 12 years since and I still worry about people smelling me.

I learned nothing about sex but I didn't care much at the time. I knew I wanted to have sex with girls (when I grew up) and I knew that was something I couldn't possibly ask my teachers or parents about. So I thought I would figure it out in due time and the whole topic of sex remained alien to me.

What nobody talked about back then was horniness. Nobody told me I would sometimes feel horny and that it was perfectly fine.

When I was 13 or 14, I sang in the school choir. I loved singing. That year, a new girl had transferred to our school and she joined the choir practice on a rainy Wednesday afternoon. The teacher asked her to sing a verse from a Christmas hymn about angels, the one with the long "Gloria." She started to sing and everybody fell quiet. She sang like she was on a heavenly cloud, like every atom in the room was aligned in perfect harmony. It was the most beautiful voice I had ever heard. I felt a strange warmth in my heart and I had goose bumps all over my body.

After the singing, she came and stood next to me and I was suddenly self-conscious of my whole body. I felt a strange wetness in my pants and I panicked. I thought I had peed or gotten my period and I quickly went and sat down. My vagina was tingling and I could feel my heartbeats inside it. I was overcome by a feeling of guilt and shame. I was ashamed that the disgusting part of my body was the one to react most strongly to the beautiful voice I had heard. I was ashamed that my vagina was acting up during a Christmas hymn. I thought it would take me straight to Hell.

Thereafter, whenever I attended the choir practice, I angrily controlled myself. I tuned out and avoided the girl with the angelic voice. Of course, that didn't stop me from getting horny every time I came across something sexy.

The first time a girl kissed me, I got so wet and so embarrassed, I immediately rushed to the toilet and cleaned myself aggressively. The smell was strange to me and I remembered what the teacher said about everybody smelling your vagina. I was paranoid about people smelling my wetness and knowing the terrible thing I had done. I didn't dare ask my mother about it. How could I tell her about these evil feelings and excretions?

It took many years after that for me to get comfortable with my vaginas and to enjoy wetness as a good and natural thing. Don't they know those idiots that teach little girls whatever supposed sex education they give us, that little girls hang on every word they say?

## MY FAITH IS ABOUT LOVE

DISCRIMINATION  
HOMOPHOBIA  
HETEROSEXUALITY  
ACTIVISM  
COMING OUT  
GAY  
RELATIONSHIPS  
SEXUAL DIVERSITY  
RELIGION  
COMMUNITY  
SELF-DISCOVERY  
IMMIGRATION



For the past 10 years of my life, I've been part of a Christian youth group. I first joined when I was 10 years old and am still very much a part of it today. We hold weekly meetings with different activities, discussions, projects, camps – just like all youth groups. One day, back when I was 13, we had an inter-regional meeting where people came in from different branches of the group. I remember that day very clearly. I walked into the room and a certain girl caught my attention. I immediately felt that there was something different about her. We got to talk and hang out a bit that day and took each other's emails. At the time, I didn't think of her as a girl I liked, but rather as a friend I had made. We emailed each other often and talked a lot on the phone. We became best friends and I suddenly found myself not talking to any of my other friends anymore – just her.

Many months passed with us talking on the phone and online. We used to go on family outings together. One day during the Christmas vacation, I kissed her. It happened suddenly and surprised us both. I don't know why I did it. I hadn't planned or anticipated anything of the sort. I just kissed her and she kissed me back. I freaked out afterwards. The next day, we decided to talk about it, and a very harsh reaction came out of me. I was on a guilt trip. I told her it was a huge mistake and that we should never do it again. "I am not gay," I said. Religion teaches us that homosexuality is wrong; it's a sin. She, on the other hand, was very accepting of the matter. She told me we had to face the fact that we were both lesbians. I was totally and resentfully against the idea. We got into huge fights about it.

The next time we saw each other, we kissed again, and then again after that. It went on for months. And for months, we would have the same

argument. I didn't know why I was kissing a girl, why I was falling in love with one, when in my head it felt so incredibly guilty and wrong. I was fixated on the idea that the Church did not accept homosexuals, that what I was doing was sinful and shameful. I battled with my own morals and values. My internal struggle went on for two years. Two whole years.

Then one day, out of the blue, at 15 years of age, I wake up and it hits me that I could be wrong in my thinking. I could very much be normal and my homosexuality could be normal too. With time, I re-evaluated everything I had been taught about Christianity. It was difficult and not without much struggle, but she was by my side during the entire process. She never gave up on me and I am grateful for that. There are two things about my character that came into play. Firstly, I am quite conservative and loyal to my principles. But at the same time, I am constantly rebelling. It sounds like a contradiction, I know, but I guess I am always searching for a set of values to believe in and adhere to. When I hear people attacking religion, I get defensive. But when I am with religious people, I debate a lot of things.

I talked to a lot of religious figures and was lucky to find progressive individuals. I realized that religion is fluid and that spirituality is about living the happiest life that you can, being the best person that you can be. The Church made a lot of mistakes throughout history. What is the Church but its people? And people make mistakes. There's a lot in the literal texts of the Bible that I don't agree with, things to do with women and how women should behave. Homosexuality doesn't hurt anybody and it doesn't offend God. On the contrary, it's about love and the freedom to love. It's about the right to live fully and happily. Those texts in the Bible that religious figures quote to condemn homosexuality aren't about two people of the same sex in love. Not at all. They're about rape and decadence and greed. And people wrongly equate homosexuality with these things. I deduced that homosexuality couldn't possibly be a sin. God created me the way I am and made no mistake about it.

I see this same struggle in lesbians all the time. They feel that something is missing from their lives. They aren't happy. That's how I was for a very long time. I see gays and lesbians sometimes throwing out religion altogether because they cannot reconcile it with their sexuality. For me, it is not logical to live without spirituality or beliefs. I had no reason to reject spirituality altogether, to reject the beautiful principles of love and forgiveness. My faith is not based on the details of how to live or on limitations of how you are supposed to behave. My faith is about love. Love is everything that Jesus Christ ever talked about. If I had read about Jesus as a regular guy, who authored a regular book, I would have still followed His teachings. Real Christianity equals unconditional love. There is no greater love than to give one's life for those we love. Isn't that what we do as activists? We give our lives to fight the systems of oppression and help lesbians find their happiness and freedom. We help them love themselves.

## GOD'S WILL

DISCRIMINATION  
 SELF ESTEEM  
 GENDER IDENTITY  
 ACTIVISM  
**COMING OUT**  
**FAMILY**  
 RELATIONSHIPS  
 SEXUAL DIVERSITY  
**RELIGION**  
 COMMUNITY  
 SELF DISCOVERY  
 EMERGENCY



I was 17 when I came out to myself as a lesbian. I had always felt that there was something odd about my sexuality, but it wasn't until I was 17 that I was able to tell myself: I am a lesbian.

As soon as I came out to myself, I desperately wanted to come out to my mother. We were in Saudi Arabia at the time and I browsed through gay websites and wondered what my mother would say about them. We are very close, my mom and I. We never kept secrets from each other. I was always open and honest with her about everything. I never attempted to hide my boyish qualities or to tell her that I didn't want to get married when I grew up.

I asked my friends for advice and everyone, without exception, said: Don't tell your mom! They said it was too early for me, that I had barely just come out to myself, that she wouldn't understand, that I should wait till I'm older, stronger, and wiser. But I couldn't lie to her; it was too big a secret to keep. So only three weeks after I first came out to myself, I told my mother I was gay. I remember the situation very well. I was shaking with fear and I spoke quickly. To my surprise, my mother took the news very calmly. She listened to me closely and the first thing she said was: "*Rabbaytik mnee?*"<sup>1</sup> It sounded like half-way in between a question and a statement.

Then she asked me: "Do you seek female love because I didn't love you enough?" "Yih!" I said. "Of course not! On the contrary!" (My mother always spoiled me). We had a short but very heartfelt talk about my sexuality, and I was overwhelmingly grateful for her reaction. Her major concern was that I shouldn't tell people – not because she was ashamed

<sup>1</sup> I raised you well.

of it – but because she feared that they would hurt me. We come from a very small town in the North, so my mother worried that if I told one person, the entire town would find out, and she knew their reaction would not be so supportive.

My mother is a devout Muslim woman. Her belief in God is so powerful that she surrenders everything to His will. Anything that happens is because God wills it. And so she didn't question or challenge my homosexuality. "*Allah heik ketiblik*,"<sup>2</sup> she said. She told me it made no sense for her to try to change God's will. Shortly after, I told my father, and he had the same reaction: "We cannot change what is God's will. If it is meant for you to change, you will change on your own." This is an odd reaction for Muslim parents, who usually get scared of their children's actions being sinful. Not my parents. When they thought about it and discussed the matter between themselves, they deduced that my living a lie was a bigger sin than my sexuality. They told me that it was better for me to be honest with myself and my parents than to be a hypocrite.

Both my parents worry about my future. Every once in a while, my dad asks my mom if I have changed. He worries about who would be there to support me when I am older. My mother always worries about society's homophobia towards me. But my parents' faith is the source of their compassion and unconditional love towards me and all of their children.

I consider myself a religious woman. I often hear a lot of criticism about being a veiled lesbian. Members of the gay community don't quite understand; they think that homosexuality and religion are contradictory identities. But I am very comfortable with my faith, especially the faith that my parents have set as an example for me. At the end of the day, I am confident that God knows me and understands the deepest parts of me. People often think that Islam is the least tolerant of religions

<sup>2</sup> This is what God has written for you.

towards homosexuality. But that's a sad misconception that has lately been enforced on us by all the Islamophobia from the West. Like all religions, Islamic faith is distorted by politics and social institutions, but the essence of it is about love, acceptance, and the value of each individual's human dignity above everything else.

## HOW HIGH SCHOOL CRUSHED ME

**DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM**

**SELF-LOVE**

EXTRA

CONCLUSION

1990



School can be a cruel place for anyone who's just a little bit different than everyone else. And it's especially cruel for young lesbians. When I was younger, I got bullied for a lot of things: wearing glasses, being overweight, not doing well at sports. I developed strong coping mechanisms and learned to deal with the bullies, who were mostly boys (and sometimes girls) in my class. But I wasn't prepared for the bullying I was going to get my last year of high school. Which college did I choose afterwards? The one farthest away from any of my classmates.

At the beginning of the year, I was doing great. My grades were good, my friends were fun, and there was a lot of hope for graduation and college. But all of that changed the day my best friend came and told me: "People are saying that you are a lesbian." My heart dropped. "Who is saying that?" I asked. "I don't know, but my friend told me I should stop hanging out with you." "Would you?" I asked. "What? I Am you really a lesbian?" she said. "No, of course not!" I replied. "Ok, fine, *ouza tkouni*<sup>1</sup> lesbian," she said, "I would kill myself for having been your friend all these years." "No, of course not!" I repeated, my heart ripping to a million pieces inside me.

But the rumors continued and spread like wildfire and within a week, everyone in my class had heard that I was a lesbian. I don't know who started the rumor because I had never told anyone. I think it was probably my short hair and loose clothes. But suddenly, my life changed completely and I grew more and more scared of the looks and whispers of people around me. I became horribly self-conscious, almost paranoid about what people were saying and if they were laughing at me. Suddenly, the friendships I had built for nine years in the same

school dissolved into nothingness. My self-esteem went crashing down and I fell into a deep depression. I tried to maintain a happy, carefree attitude with everyone, flirting more with boys, talking about makeup and clothes with girls, but I couldn't shake the rumor away.

One day in the playground, I was sitting in the corner, revising some material for an exam I had after recess. My same friend came up to me and was asking something about the test, when she suddenly asked, "*Leh ma bitzabtli sha3rik?*"

"It's fixed," I said, pulling it back from my face. "*Hayda mzabbat? Min gheir shee killon bi oulo zannik lesbian.*"<sup>2</sup> I felt the blood in me boil suddenly and rise quickly to my head. "*Meen killon?*"<sup>3</sup> I screamed out. "*Mashee... maba3rif,*"<sup>4</sup> she said.

"*MEEN KILLON?!!!*" I was screaming my head off and I grabbed my friend from her neck and threw her to the floor. I was shaking and blinded with rage and I found myself punching her face and shoulders and arms. All I could say was variations of "*meen?*"<sup>5</sup> I wanted to know who was speaking about me behind my back. I lost myself for a few minutes. My friend kept screaming "*ma ba3rif... khalas... oumi zanni?*"<sup>6</sup> till the supervisor came through the circle of kids that had formed around us and pulled me off of her.

I was panting with fury. I wanted to kill someone, to destroy something. I was sent straight to the principal's office, where I sat waiting for him for two hours. I couldn't stop shaking and crying. A couple of hours later, he arrived and yelled at me for the fight I had started in the playground. "*Ya 3ayb el shoom!*" he said. "*Ya 3ayb el shoom. Min aymta bta3imli heik?*"<sup>7</sup>

He pressed to know what the problem was. I told him people were saying bad things about me behind my back. He said: "*W ya3ni? Kill il ness heik*

<sup>1</sup> Don't you dare be.

<sup>2</sup> Why don't you fix your hair?  
<sup>3</sup> You call that 'fixed'?  
Everybody already calls you a lesbian.  
<sup>4</sup> Who is everybody?

<sup>5</sup> Nothing... I don't know.  
<sup>6</sup> Who?  
<sup>7</sup> I don't know... Enough... Get off of me...  
<sup>8</sup> Shame on you! Since when do you act like this?

*bta3mil. Tasamofetik mitil il 7ayawenet!*<sup>9</sup> I got suspended for two days.

They called my mother, who was furious with me and locked me in my room. I didn't say a word those two days. I just cried.

I flirted with the idea of saying: "Yes, I am a lesbian! So what?" But I couldn't even handle that option. I couldn't think of it. It was impossible. I had no support, no backup. I knew they would put me in a mental hospital for that.

I went back to school the next week only to start counting the days till I was out. It was a total nightmare. My grades dropped and I became extremely anti-social. Everyone just stopped talking to me. If anything, after that horrible incident, everyone was sure I was a lesbian. They made me see the school counselor once a week, but I hated those meetings. Even the counselor kept telling me that I should behave more like "proper girls." My life just spiraled downwards and there was no stopping it. I couldn't get people to stop talking about me. I couldn't get bullies to stop shouting "lezbol!" at me almost every day at school. I couldn't make new friends or keep the old ones. And the worst part was that I couldn't handle any of it and not care. In school, peer pressure is at its highest; you can't possibly not care about your likeability or what other kids think of you. I cried myself to sleep every night, and dreaded the long walk to class every morning. I dreaded recess. I didn't go to prom. My insecurities still haunt me today as a young adult. My emotional health was devastated for a long time. I don't know what kind of school educational system would allow gay and lesbian kids to be crushed just because of their sexual orientation. It is pure cruelty.

I haven't spoken to my best friend since that incident. Her phone number is entrenched in my memory, and I can't forget it no matter how hard I try. I want to tell her I am sorry, but I can't bring myself to do that – even today. Maybe one day she will read this story and she will know.

<sup>9</sup> So what? Everybody does that. You are behaving like animals.

## THE ONE LOVE THAT BREAKS YOU

SELF-ESTEEM

RELATIONSHIPS



I can say without a doubt that I have lived my entire 32 years in love with a single person. And in the 13 years that I have known her, she never loved me back. She liked me, she befriended me, she kissed me, but she never loved me. She couldn't. She was and still is unable to love another woman. People tell me all the time: Lesbians can change. They can become straight if they really wanted to. Well guess what. Straight girls can't turn gay, so how in the world can gay girls turn straight?

I met her at Crepaway in Jounieh back in 1996 at a birthday dinner for a common friend. It was my first year of college. She was with her boyfriend, the first of many boyfriends I would hate over the years to come, but I didn't care at the time. I fell in love with her in five seconds – the time it took for her to smile at me when our friend introduced us. What can I possibly say about her that can express how much I loved her? That she was beautiful? That she was kind-hearted? That she was funny? That she carried the sun in her eyes and the moon in her smile? What can I possibly say? We started out as friends, then became great friends, and within a year, I told her I was in love with her. She took the news with a smile and said to me: "On a tous le droit d'aimer." We all have the right to love. But she also said she loved me incredibly as a friend, but could never be in love with me. She was heterosexual, she said, and she couldn't see herself with another woman.

I was devastated, but it didn't keep me from staying with her and from falling more deeply in love with her. I accepted that she could not love me, but I insisted on loving her all the same. She never turned my love away. She accepted it and cherished it, and there were times when I thought I had managed to make her love me. But that never happened.

If anything, I only managed to confuse her and make her feel guilty. Together, we went through all the things young adults go through: fighting with parents, losing friends, failing university exams, finding and losing first jobs. We watched movies and went out dancing. We cried together and laughed together. She lived her double life as my reluctant lover and as a straight Lebanese girl. And every few months, we would fight and argue about it. I begged her to be my girlfriend, but she never accepted. At the same time, she didn't want me to leave her. In her own special way, she loved me and needed me and grew incredibly attached to me.

"How could you call yourself heterosexual when we live like girlfriends and have sex like lovers?" I would ask her. "It's you," she would reply, "I have all these feelings for you, but I can't be with you, not in Lebanon. If we were born somewhere else, then maybe. If you were a man, I would marry you. But I can't live a homosexual life in Lebanon; I just can't. I love my normal life." For five years, I tried to convince her that she could be bisexual, that we could make it together, that we could travel to France or Canada and live together happily, but it was all in vain.

By the end of those five years, our relationship had become angry and depressive and resentful. I almost went insane, calling her at 3am crying and screaming, showing up at her parents' house at 6am still crying, following her in my car every night, waiting for her at street corners. I thought I was going to die of jealousy and rage and possessiveness.

She finished her degree and got a job in Dubai and decided in what seemed to me like the blink of an eye to leave Lebanon. When she told me, my heart froze and remained frozen for days as she prepared for her move. I couldn't talk or cry or even get out of bed. I didn't know what to do, so I did nothing. The day before her flight, she sent me a message saying "I don't know how to say goodbye to you." I went over to her

house and sat on her bed as she packed. I was still silent. This time I was sure I was going to die the next morning. I spent the night lying by her on the bed, watching her sleeping. At dawn, I began to weep uncontrollably. I grabbed her and squeezed her close to my body, shaking and trembling. She cried with me, trying to calm me down. "Maybe this is better for us," she said. "What were you going to do? Stay in a one-sided love affair forever? What was I going to do? Keep on accepting all your love and affection when I know I can never give you anything in return?" "Yes," I said. "Do whatever you want, just stay with me." "No," she replied. "This is not normal. It has to stop." Morning came and it was time for her to go. Her boyfriend was giving her a lift to the airport. I couldn't let go of her. She had to forcefully push me away and her nails cut through my skin.

I went back home that morning and slept for days – I don't know how many. When I finally got out of bed, I knew I was going to live the rest of my life empty and lost, and that's how I've been for the last eight years. Slowly, I began to forget details about her. Sometimes I forget she even exists. We only talk occasionally now, maybe once or twice a year. We say hello and ask about each other's health and families. I don't know who she is anymore or if she's even the same person I was so madly in love with. Half of me died that day she left, and with it my heart disappeared. I am unable to love anyone now or to genuinely care about anything. I haven't had feelings for anyone since her. Who do I blame for my broken heart? For a long time I blamed her for not being brave enough to love me. For a longer time I blamed myself for what I didn't do that I could've done to make her love me. And I blamed the messed up society we lived in that would come between true love, that would take the love of my life away from me.

People keep telling me it will be alright and that I will be happy again. I don't understand what they're talking about. I don't understand

romantic movies or love songs. I can't identify with that happy feeling of love everyone keeps talking about. All I know is that one love that breaks you, that scars you beyond repair, that reduces you to a zombie, that renders you a ghost living only because you must, only because you have not died yet.



## THIS LAND IS NOT MY LAND

### DISCRIMINATION

### FAMILY

### EMIGRATION

I realized I was queer when I was in college in Jordan, despite its very conservative environment. I was always attracted to women, but my first experience was in college when I fell in love with a woman while dating a guy. My boyfriend at the time found out and it created tons of problems which escalated into police being involved. I was forced to move back with my family the last year of college, and my mom caught me kissing a girl, but didn't say a word. Later on, the girl's mother contacted mine and told her we were having an unnatural relationship. My mother freaked out. We denied there was anything between us. That was when I got really scared and felt that I either had to leave Jordan or live a straight life.

And so I chose to escape. But to do that with my parents' approval, it had to involve school. By 23, I had applied to different PhD programs in the US and I ended up in a very conservative state. I didn't care where I went as long as I could leave. But that meant that I had to completely compartmentalize myself. In Jordan, I was the straight member of my big, traditional family. In the US, I was gay and on my own. But what I did not know at the time was that I was not ready for the white, Republican, straight, Arabophobic, male-dominated mentality that I found myself facing in the US.

Suddenly, I became an Arab ambassador, enthusiastically answering all sorts of dumb questions on a daily basis. People were confused when they found out I was Arab, Christian, queer, and down with Islam. They found it odd that my family had never been oppressed by Muslims. Aren't all Arabs Muslim and all Muslims terrorists? Turns out that being open about your identity is just as hard as being in the closet.

The hardest part was when my parents visited me a couple of months ago. It was the first time that I allowed both sides of me to meet each other. Of course, I de-gay'd the house and my girlfriend became my best friend who lived with me in my one-bedroom apartment. They went back to Amman convinced that everything in my life was "normal" – according to their understanding.

I ran away from home looking for the freedom to do what I wanted without being judged, and by escaping, I chose to leave behind a big part of who I am. It remains heavy on my heart. I have never felt that this house is my home, or even that this stuff is my furniture. But if I could go back in time, I would do the same thing all over again, because I don't think I am ready to merge my two lives in Jordan. If I didn't leave, I would have never explored the different dimensions of who I was, I would have never questioned everything the way I was able to in the US.

But the gay community here is not the supportive, understanding community you'd think it would be. Some people are racist or Zionist. They can't understand who I am or where I'm coming from. I cannot relate to anything with them other than sexual preference, which is not enough grounds for me to establish relationships with people. Being queer here is all about being proud and colorful. It's one big party. In Jordan, you don't talk about sexuality even if you're straight. You are simply part of a community and you are modest about it. It's all about being a part of the family and fitting in, which is not necessarily a good thing, but it's our culture.

To me, being queer is not only about loving women; but also about being aware of my family and how they are feeling. Once I went to a group therapy session for gays and lesbians in the city, and one of the guys said to me after hearing my story: "Your family just needs to get over it. If they don't like it, then fuck them. Just leave." What an absurd

piece of advice! It is not even an option for me to just leave my family. My world revolves around the well-being of my mother, my father and my siblings because I love them so much. When my family is happy, I am automatically happy. They have done so much for me that I can't just say "yalla, bye" to them. This bond grows with age – it doesn't just disappear.

I have been independent throughout my stay here and I thought it would help me be stronger. And it has. But it hasn't helped me feel that I can come out to my family. I know my family loves me just the same, but I also know that if I told my mother, she would blame herself and that would kill me. She has given so much to me, to my brother and sister. When my brother got cancer, she blamed herself and her genes. She is ridiculous like that. I panic every time I think of coming out to her. The guilt would kill me, and my mother has done a great job – like all mothers do – of instilling guilt in her children.

I am always hoping to end up somewhere in the Middle East: find a job and "come back." But I don't think it will be Amman. I need a place that's far enough from my family and close enough at the same time. Maybe Beirut; maybe Turkey, I'm not sure. But wherever you travel, wherever you escape to, there is always the burning desire to come back home.



## WE ARE NOT SAFE

### DISCRIMINATION

My family moved a lot when I was younger. We lived all over the Northern Metn: Sin el Fil, Dora, Jal el Dib, Dbayeh. We moved into a new neighborhood close to Antelias during my first year of college. College to me meant freedom and the beginning of nightlife. I'm one of those very outgoing lesbians – the first to go to any new lesbian bar or gay club, always dancing at ACID on Friday nights. I'm one of those shining examples of Lebanon's "booming gay life" as everybody likes to put it. I drive my own car and am always the one giving friends rides home after a late night partying. I often get heckled or cursed by guys on the street for my clothes or my spiky hair or my dyke attitude, especially when driving late at night, but I always ignore them.

I was getting out of my car late one night (it was around 2am) to get home, when I saw a group of men walking quickly towards me. I quickly looked away and got incredibly frightened. My first thought was to run to the building, but I just froze, and reached for my mobile phone, wanting to pretend to make a phone call. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, they had reached me, hit me on the head, and carried me into a car. I don't remember losing consciousness, but I don't remember screaming either.

They took me in their car further up the road of the hillside where my house is. They drove on for I don't know how many kilometers, until they made a turn onto a dirt road and kept driving. I remember the taste of one man's hand on my mouth, gagging me so I couldn't make any noise. They weren't saying much and they weren't talking to me. I cannot describe with any words what I was feeling during those moments. Terror, maybe? No, not terror, something much greater and much more horrible.

Somewhere (I haven't dared go and try find where) not very far from my parents' house, two of the men threw me onto the ground and raped me. I had not had penetrative sex before, so they took my so-called "virginity." I hate that they think they took something from me. I hate that I will always feel they took something from me. I was also forced to have oral sex with them. It happened very quickly and it was very dark, and I can swear I felt my heart stopping and dropping through my vagina to the ground. You know that feeling when they tell you someone you love just died in a car accident? No wait. Imagine the feeling when they tell you someone you love just got murdered. I felt like I was being murdered. I wanted to pray, but I couldn't because I was so embarrassed, so ashamed.

They returned me to a ditch behind my building, pushed me out of the car, and drove off. I quickly hurried into my car and sat in the front seat. I don't remember crying, but I had tears all over my face and lots of spit in my mouth. A million thoughts were racing through my mind about what to tell my parents. I don't know why I thought I had to tell them something. I was only disheveled and slightly bruised where it shows, and I knew they'd probably be asleep. I ran my fingers through my hair a few times, wiped my face dry, and went up quietly into my house, into my room, and straight into the shower. My body would not stop shaking and I could not stop crying for days. For weeks I was haunted by the ominous feeling that something terrible was going to happen to me, although I don't know what I thought could possibly happen that was worse than that night. I think I see the same men sometimes in the neighborhood, but I can't recognize any of them. I see them everywhere.

Even today, some years after the incident, I'm not ready to deal with any questions: Why didn't you scream? Why didn't you tell your parents or the police? Why didn't you go to a hospital? Don't give me any questions. I know all the theories about what you're supposed to do if you get

raped – no wait – *when* you get raped. I didn't want to get even with the criminals. I just wanted to be left alone and forget it ever happened. The funny thing is that you think you're immune to these things when you're a lesbian – especially when you're a tough dyke. You think if you cut your hair short and wear punk clothes, men will leave you alone.

The truth is I was too scared to tell anyone – my parents, my girlfriend, my friends. I felt helpless. I felt so violated as a woman and as a lesbian. I couldn't admit – even to myself – that I got raped. I was not only enraged at the invasion of my female body, but more so at the invasion of my right as a lesbian to not have sex with men. I felt ashamed at betraying my own sexuality, and I couldn't talk or think about it. But today, I am telling my story. I want people to know that it happens, that it could happen to anyone.

Not very long afterwards, I was out partying again. I buried the incident in my memory, but I couldn't bury the fear. I stopped returning home after dark. I would go and sleep over at friends' houses. My parents were furious with me and I couldn't tell them why it was impossible for me to drive back home at night. You couldn't tell, if you saw me then, that anything had changed, but inside, a big part of me was dead and defeated. And that is why it boils my blood when I hear organizations or reporters claiming that "Lebanon is a safe haven for gays and lesbians." Bullshit. It's not safe for any woman – let alone lesbians.



## COMING OUT TO MY MOM ON A LATE FEBRUARY NIGHT

ASSIMILATION  
 SELF-ESTEEM  
 GENDER IDENTITY  
 ACTIVISM  
 COMING OUT  
 FAMILY  
 RELATIONSHIPS  
 SEXUAL IDENTITY  
 RESISTANCE  
 COMMUNITY  
 SELF-DISCOVERY  
 INNOVATION

I was standing in my bedroom pacing around. The heat was rising in my neck and I knew it was time. It came unexpectedly as all milestones usually come. They sneak up on you at the oddest of times. Mine came to me on a late February night. And like all things that come on late February nights, it came too late to postpone and too early for me to put on the right shoes. All I could think of was that I was ready, that I was prepared. And yet I put my car keys and cell phone in my pocket – just in case. You never get over the fear of being thrown out. It never leaves you. You think of it every time you walk into a restaurant, every day you go to work, every time you step into your home. It comes with the lesbian territory, and you think of it. Every single time.

The main instigation was that my sister had received an anonymous email telling her I was a lesbian. A lesbian with a Z. She was angry and disgusted by me. She felt ashamed. I talked to her briefly but didn't give it much attention. I knew my sister would cope with it eventually. I knew my real battle was with my mother. And I knew my sister would tell her.

So I went into my room and I made up my mind that I was going to talk to my mother. I yelled out a quick prayer in my head. There were no words to it, but it would translate to something like: "God! Drop everything now and come with me!" And I walked out into the living room. My mom was sitting alone next to the heater, watching TV. I sat down on the couch opposite her and told her I needed to talk to her about something very important. I felt myself slipping into an alternate form of existence. There was something bigger holding me, holding my throat. I had never – not one single time in my life – talked about anything with my mother.

I had never not broken down and cried whenever she was angry with me about anything, my lifestyle in particular. So I was definitely not myself that night. It was a different strength that overcame me.

I told Mom that I knew she had always known that I loved women.

"Yes," she said, unexpectedly calm.

"Can you please accept that... accept me the way I am?"

She told me to do whatever I wanted to do.

I smiled. "That's it?"

"That's it. But don't expect me to ever accept it. That is impossible."

For the next hour I explained to her that homosexuality was normal. The arguments flowed consistently in my head. Some people are just born gay; they can't help it. Ten percent of the world is gay. It's totally normal and it doesn't mean I do drugs or drink too much alcohol or have an unhealthy lifestyle. I'm doing alright. I'm happy. Many people accept homosexuality; doctors and psychologists have long said that it was perfectly normal. My coworkers and my boss accept me the way I am. Socrates was gay. Shakespeare was gay. Leonardo Da Vinci was gay. Abu Nuwas was gay. The mayor of Paris is gay. (I couldn't find any examples of famous lesbians). Canada allows two women to get married. There are thousands of cool, smart, fun, wonderful gay people in Lebanon. Human rights defenders in Lebanon acknowledge gay rights.

She was not convinced. She argued back in ways I had heard too often before. Occasionally, I saw hope in her listening to me. There was love in her arguments. It is true that all our parents want is for us to be happy.

It is true. At the bottom of it all, my mom just wanted me to be happy. So much of what she said had nothing to do with my homosexuality. It was about my well-being.

I spoke so calmly that she seemed shocked at my composure. It is true that calmness is half the battle won. It is true. At the end of it all, she still insisted that she could not accept it, that I should not ask her to. But ask her I did. I asked her to at least try and I told her that I would wait 10 years if I had to. I told her that I wanted us to be friends and I wanted to tell her everything. I told her nothing else was even an option, and that I would accept nothing less. She started shivering and crying quietly. I told her that crying was good, and that she should be crying out of joy that we had finally – after 25 years – started to communicate. She didn't reply. I decided to give her some time to cry. I decided she needed to go through all the stages from denial to acceptance. I got up and left wondering what tomorrow would feel like. It was a whole new battle – the most important battle of my life – that had opened, and it was a battle long overdue. Strangely, I left the room feeling overjoyed. I felt strong. I wondered if things would backlash or improve. Either way I was ready. There was no other option but for things to improve. Let them take all the time in the world.



## MY QUEST TO FIND LESBIANS

SELF-ESTEEM

COMMUNITY

The first word I ever searched for on Yahoo! was "homosexual." It was the first day my dad got me a dial-up Internet connection for my birthday. It was October 1998 and internet back then cost a fortune. I remember it was something like \$6 an hour, so I had to be very quick and I got right down to the point. I had to find some lesbians!

Finding each other is always a basic need of anyone in the gay community. Back before mIRC and ACID and Facebook and Meem, it was impossible for me to find other lesbians. I didn't even know other lesbians existed. It's funny now that I think of it. Surely I must have known they existed. But in reality, I thought they were somewhere far far away, definitely not in Lebanon. The idea of finding other Lebanese lesbians was like a distant, impossible dream.

The popular chatting program at the time was called ICQ, which I immediately downloaded, created some romantically morbid nickname, and set out to find other lesbians. There was some method of searching through lists of people and I spent hours looking till I found someone with a nickname like "sexy\_lesbian\_4u." Oh my God! I thought, a sexy lesbian for me! I messaged her instantly and said: "hi!!!!!! I am a lesbian too!" She said hi back but with far less enthusiasm and then asked me if I wanted her to bite my ear. I wondered why she was saying that, but was so excited about meeting another fellow lesbian that I just started babbling on with details about my life, the suffering I'd been through, the identity crisis, the broken heart, and other teenage lesbian drama. You have to remember, it was over 10 years ago, and I was very slow at typing. Then the sexy lesbian 4 me made a very indecent proposition that involved touching her private parts. I was shocked. Mortified. "No!" I said. "I want us to talk and share our life stories!"

Of course, she was not interested, so she disappeared.

I was totally heart-broken for a week, but I soldiered on, determined to meet another lesbian. After many variations of sexy lesbian nicknames, I finally found a "normal" lesbian called Janet who lived in London. She was interested to hear about my life and I poured out everything to her. I would chat with her for hours without end. Sometimes, I skipped school because I was up all night chatting with her and writing her emails. A few days later, I told her I was madly and insanely in love with her and asked her – begged her – to marry me.

Of course, she thought I was crazy and disappeared.

After another short-term heartbreak, I continued my quest to find more lesbians. All this time, I had never even imagined the thought of actually finding an Arab lesbian – let alone a Lebanese one. I still believed I was the only lesbian in Lebanon. Months passed. One clue led to another, and someone pointed me in the direction of the life-changing invention called mIRC (also a chatting program). I logged in immediately and searched the Lebanese chat rooms till my heart blissfully landed upon what was one of the most crowded Lebanese chat rooms on mIRC: #gaylebanon!

There were hundreds of nicknames in the channel... thousands! Ok, not thousands, but to me, it seemed like an entire independent universe. I was going to faint with happiness! Night and day I logged into the chat room, desperately trying to find Lebanese lesbians, but I didn't. Instead, I made friends with tens of gay men, one of whom eventually pointed me to a chat room called #lesbanon, to which I logged on immediately. This time round, I had learnt my lesson and decided to play it cool. "Hello, lesbians" is the first thing I said, trying hard not to show any enthusiasm.

I chatted with the online lesbians for months, but never met anyone in person. I was still in school and couldn't go anywhere without my parents' permission. And I was too insecure to venture out into the real world as who I really was: a naïve little dyke who'd never kissed a girl. I didn't talk about my inner feelings or struggles because I was too scared that people would find me strange and stop talking to me. I pretended everything was great in my life. I'd lie and say that I went clubbing to the places they went to. I'd make up imaginary girlfriends and then pretend to have broken up with these girlfriends just to seem interesting. I would stay in #lesbanon for hours every night wearing my "I'm-too-cool-for-this-chatroom" mask and talking to other chatters, many of whom I could never tell if they were real lesbians or annoying men posing as lesbians. We would spend the whole night banning people and kicking people out of the room.

Months passed, and I felt that I had become a boring chatroom character. Nobody had asked me out or even asked me to be their online girlfriend. Yes, people would couple up online at the time without actually meeting each other. So I logged off completely, created a new nickname and logged back into the chatroom under a new persona. This time I played the hot, sexy, femme fatale character who regretted breaking so many hearts and was on the lookout for true love. They bought it instantly and I became a chatroom hottie. I continued to chat with other lesbians for hours every single night. I'd make up stories to stay interesting, and the lies grew so big that it became impossible for me to meet these people in real life because they would find out who I really was. And of course, I thought of my real self as utterly boring and unattractive. So I stuck to my online persona.

After a while, my parents grew tired of the phone bills and my falling behind in school, so they cut me off the Internet for months till I passed my official exams. For a brief period it was like cutting off my oxygen,



but I quickly adapted back into my "normal" world, and to tell you the truth, it was a relief not to have to lie all the time. When I did log back online eventually, #lesbanon was totally dead. Lesbians had started meeting frequently in places like ACID, Sheikh Mankoush (a café on Bliss Street), and Dunkin Donuts, and they didn't need the chatroom anymore.

I don't know the names of any of the people with whom I shared a virtual life for so long. I only remember a few nicknames, but even those are fading away from my head. I made no real friends at the time. It was extremely hard back then to find a real supportive community of people who understand and respect you for who you really are. We were forced to create alternate personae of ourselves online. I often wonder if the new generation of lesbians appreciates their much easier (and much cheaper) access to the Internet and the availability of a welcoming support group like Meem. They don't know how lucky they really are.

## THE MIND-BOGGLING QUEER

DISCRIMINATION  
 SEX SYSTEM  
**GENDER IDENTITY**  
**ACTIVISM**  
 COMING OUT  
 RELAY  
 RELATIONSHIPS  
**SEXUAL DIVERSITY**  
 POLICE  
 COMUNITY  
**SELF-DISCOVERY**  
 INFORMATION

My entire life, I have always questioned gender. I never understood why human beings had to fit into one category or the other, or what differentiates us other than certain body parts. This was always my "weird" way of wondering about gender because ok, in our society, we have "male" and "female", but then again, I always intuitively knew there must be so much that goes beyond that.

When I was a teenager, during my book phase, I kept looking for something that would fit these dreams or this conception of the body that I had. I read quite a bit about transgender theories, but did not consider myself a transgender person. Still, this idea of the blurring of gender boundaries was always very interesting to me and I remember talking with my friends about it back in my teenage years. When I was young and having my first sexual fantasies, I started thinking of hermaphrodites, intersex persons (although I didn't have a technical name for them), people that embodied both sexes physically and spiritually, and I never knew what it meant. I never went far with my thinking. My friends simply got a few laughs out of me, until I actually went on reading and came across books and articles about transgender people, intersex people, and androgynous people. I was fascinated by people who do limited sex change surgery, for example, who are stuck in between male and female bodies, which would not exactly put them in any socially-defined box. You cannot identify them as male or female because they have part of whatever it takes to have a female anatomy, but also part of whatever it takes to have a male anatomy. So I started wondering: What is the limit of male? Of female?

For years, I would still be fascinated by this idea of blurred sexual identities. I found myself attracted to such individuals because they

boldly defied society, especially our Lebanese society where you are constantly categorized and referenced. You have to play with certain toys, dress a certain way, behave in a certain manner. For me, the existence of this extreme social "deviance" was very satisfying because it was like one big "Ha! In your face!" slap at society. These identities exist, and they exist on a level that is so much beyond being a tomboy or a drag queen.

I think my attraction to these blurred gender people has a lot to do with my personal ethnic identity quest. I am Lebanese of Armenian descent. I have a Canadian nationality. I have traveled extensively and lived a big part of my life in European cities. I have always been trying to find certain defined roots and I have always ended up realizing that my roots are complex and diverse and could never be explained in a single word or even a sentence. So I am very much attracted to this complexity, this puzzle, this courage of what makes a person become a person. I don't believe people should be categorized or that they can be put in boxes, I don't think you can give them percentages such as "you're 50% male" or "you're 20% female." I think people can just be 100% of everything. All these little pieces, they make you a whole. All these little pieces.

The burning urge to put people into boxes also exists strongly in the LGBT community. First, you have lesbians, then butch / femme lesbians, then slightly androgynous butch, slightly dyke femmes. People come up with descriptions of a perfect girlfriend or boyfriend and they categorize and sub-categorize and sub-sub-categorize. It's mind-boggling!

When I read about queer theory, I found in it a lot of thought-out information on things I'd already been thinking about. Queer theory questions gender roles, sexual identities, sexual binaries, and single-sexuality. Being queer means you don't want to label yourself as anything, that you are just a fluid being regardless of your body, gender identification, and sexual orientation. But identifying as queer depends



a lot on who you're talking to and the community you're in. Categories can lessen the complication of things for people to understand. If you come out and say: "Hello I'm an intersex," it's confusing to people. They ask you: Where do you fall? Where do we put you? How do we talk to you? Look at you? What can we expect from you? Which social roles are you supposed to fill? It's the same in the gay community where you have to be either top or bottom because gay people often have one model of sexuality, one model of sexual intercourse. That's just the way it happens. Everything outside of these norms is met with a confused "huh?"

So when I first came out to my community friends, it was easier to say "I'm a lesbian," because that way I could fit in more easily. But when I watch the "Rocky Horror Picture Show" and Tim Curry pops on screen wearing leather and lipstick and I'm like "sexy!" my lesbian friends usually respond: "But he's a man." He's beyond a man and I am attracted to him. I guess I've been really lucky in meeting so many diverse people around the world, and that expanded my own mind about queer identity. One of my closest friends is a male-to-female transsexual. If you look at her, she's a woman, but if you look under her pants, she's a man. She's also attracted to women, so she identifies as a lesbian with a penis. There's a vast range of what a human body can be.

Lebanon is not ready for queer theory. I think Lebanese people need something more squarely defined. First let us say: Yes, all people are sexual beings. Yes, people can have sex outside of marriage. Yes, people do masturbate. Let's start with these ideas first. And then: Yes, people have different sexual orientations. Yes, they can fall for someone of the same sex. Yes, sometimes someone's sex is not necessarily their gender identity. Yes, gender is a social construct. Yes, humanity is incredibly diverse. And yes, we have started to come out.

Queer theory is a theory of deconstruction. It challenges basic fundamental values that people have attributed to things for centuries.

And queer is not only about questioning heteronormativity; it's also about questioning capitalism, governance, global politics, militarism, gentrification, colonialism, sectarianism, mass media, and all oppressive systems. But the power of queer, of course, is in its direct questioning of things like gender stereotypes and heterosexuality as "norms," because those are the most difficult systems to challenge. Many LGBT movements fall into the trap of heteronormativity themselves by categorizing people into boxes of "lesbian" or "straight."

Queer theory calls for a bigger fluidity of sexual identities. It refuses to push people into the labels of gay/straight. It is a movement for social justice that is all-inclusive. Queer is genius. I love queer. I think we should totally queer up Beirut. In Arabic, it translates into "*ghareeb al atwar*" (which also means "strange" or "peculiar") and also into "*shazz*" (deviant). I love the word "*shazzi*!" I would most proudly love to be called a "deviant" from a society like Lebanon (or any other country on the globe for that matter). It is in being deviants that we resist all the unfair distribution of power in the world today. So yes, *ana shazze*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am a deviant (queer).

## I'M COMING HOME

ACTIVISM

COMMUNITY

EMIGRATION

Since childhood, I've always been the eccentric one, whether in the way I dressed, the color of my hair or the things I talked about. I was always the odd one out in my family, my school, and my social circles. I grew up with this intense feeling that I was an alien in my surroundings, that I belonged somewhere else, and all I wanted to do was leave. Every summer, I would have the same conversation with my parents and end up crying my heart out. I lived on the sole hope that I would finish high school and leave. Leave. Leave. Leave.

My obsession with leaving had a lot to do with my sexual orientation, and I think that's the reason I always felt so out of place, although I did not fully come to terms with my sexuality until I was 15. I read and researched destinations and found the best quality of life for myself in Canada. Canada seemed like the perfect place to be. As I grew older, the same argument with my parents became more frequent and went from every summer to every night. My parents were against the idea because we are a close family and I was the eldest. Looking back, I realize that my pressing need to leave must have broken their hearts because they couldn't understand what it was I needed that they weren't providing for me. They were and still are kind, loving parents and excellent providers for their children.

By 17, my last year of high school, I kept reading about all the freedoms people enjoy in the West, and I thought the only place I could be active and fight would have to be outside Lebanon, because I couldn't see anything happening in Lebanon. It was mainly a quest for freedom. We had traveled a lot and I knew that abroad the way I was dressed, the glasses I wore, my hair color, the things I talk about, quoting Emma



Goldman just didn't ring wrong. People just looked at me and were amazed. I was a person in the crowd, not someone they pointed at because she looked different, so that was it for me. I didn't look at it as a place to settle in for a relationship, but I thought I could do whatever I wanted. I had my notions about sexuality and women and bodily rights and I couldn't see them fit anywhere here. I wanted to live abroad and forget Lebanon.

So I left when I was 18 and I didn't shed a tear.

I was ecstatic! I got to Europe and got my apartment and started studying. Everything was brilliant: the university, the people, everybody spoke my language in the sense that everybody was somehow like me, at least the crowd I hung out with. A week before leaving, strangely enough, a friend of mine had told me about Helem. She said it was an LGBT activist group and I was like: "No way. Gay rights bi Libnen?!" I visited Helem a week before travelling and I became inspired by the goals and dreams of the organization. But I still left, thinking that small incident wouldn't mean anything to me in the long run. Indeed, life in Europe was peachy for years. I became an activist there, volunteering with many LGBT and feminist organizations, in addition to Helem Paris, the organization supporting Lebanese and Arab LGBT in France. I felt content and saw no possibility in my head of going back to Lebanon.

Three years passed and I was happily and comfortably studying and living in Europe when I got an email about the creation of something called Helem Girls, a group of queer women coming together to support each other and work together. I got in touch with a few members of this group online and through a mailing list. Suddenly, I discovered people who spoke my language, people I didn't even think existed in Lebanon. I found myself becoming more attached to that group of women.

The December after that, I arrive in Lebanon for a Christmas vacation and attend the first ever Helem Girls meeting. Little did I know at the time that it would be the single event that would completely change my life. In my veins, I could feel that something magnificent was being born, and I was overwhelmed by regret for having to leave back to Europe and miss out on something huge. At the airport, a few days after, I cried for the first time. My mother laughed at me in astonishment. "You didn't even cry when you were traveling for the first time to an unknown country!" she said. "Why are you crying now?!"

Back in Europe, I went on trying to connect with all the girls I had met and trying to be as present as I could over the internet. I needed to be active with the group, to try to help out on any level possible. And the voices grew stronger in my head: What the hell am I doing here? I can't do anything for or from Europe. I'm not European, nor do I desire to ever be, and if there's something to be done then I should go do it back home in Lebanon. When you're in your own society, you overlook the things you love. Once you're abroad for years, you start missing stupid little things that make you so nostalgic, like having a *manzoushe* in the morning. It sounds very cliché, I know! Listening to Fairouz in the morning, *knefeh*, *labneh*, all the clichés suddenly started to tug at my heart!

So I held on to this idea of what Helem Girls was: a community for and by queer women. If the lesbian feminist movement was going to start, I had to be there. I had been craving this since I was 15, so I just couldn't not be there. Shortly after, the idea of Meem was brought up and I was beyond ecstatic. A lesbian feminist movement in Beirut! I kept doubting how much I could give to the community and the movement, but then I kept helping in whatever way possible because I just needed to be part of this. I felt like I had my place in it. It felt right. I said to myself: "Khalas. I'm coming home."

And I did.

I moved back to Lebanon and met the women of Meem and their House: people going in and out, smart people quoting smart writers, revolutionary women watching movies I loved, hundreds of people excited to change something. I was supposed to do a whole additional year for my studies in France, but then I brought my thesis work to Lebanon and graduated from here. Activism took over my life. I have something to fight for now, in my own country, for my own people. It is far more exhilarating than anything I had done in Europe. Nothing amounts to what I have seen or the people I've met here. Every person who walks through the door of our Womyn House is a walking, breathing part of history. There's just something boiling and soon it will explode. It will explode like fireworks. And I am home again.

## HOW IT ALL STARTED

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM

ACTIVISM  
COMING OUT

FOCUS

BEHAVIOR  
SEXUAL DIVERSITY  
PEOPLE  
COMMUNITY

EDUCATION



Thirteen years ago, a male friend of mine at school told me he was gay. This was before I ever identified as a lesbian, but I was very curious about homosexuality. During his coming out, he told me about a club that had opened in Sin el Fil called BO18. He said a lot of gay men frequented that club to meet each other among what he called a "gay-friendly" straight crowd.

I was immediately intrigued by that place and went with him one night to check it out for myself. There, I was fascinated by the posh, elitist, artsy gay men's scene. Men danced together and wore fancy clothes. They behaved in a way that was very strange to me and very different from their usual behavior during the daytime. I was surprised by some of the famous faces I recognized. It was my first experience seeing the dual lives that homosexuals lived: one during the day and a totally different one at night.

At the time, BO18 and a few similar clubs were the only places for homosexuals to meet, to let out steam from their daily pressures. It was the early 90s, and Lebanon had just come out of a long civil war. Partying was their new thing. Gay people found themselves at night and held private parties in their homes or chalets. I tagged along consistently with my gay friend to all these events and was branded his "fag hag," a straight girl who loves the company of gay men. I remember drag queen shows in Safra on Halloween nights. The men used to meet up, dressed like women, and perform "shakhir" contests in houses or clubs. "Shakhir" in Lebanese was similar to "radi7" in Egyptian. It's when a man takes on the role of a housewife, screaming comically at someone. They would do impressions of a housewife hanging out the laundry,

cutting up vegetables, cleaning the stairs, all while making fun of her neighbor or complaining about her husband. Or they would take on the role of an arrogant bitchy diva and scream insults at each other. For those brief moments, men would live the role of their alternate female personality and curse at each other and at the audience. I watched them in fascination and "yishkhirto" (to perform a "shakhra" to someone) became a tradition of the gay men's community.

In places like BO18, homosexuals took on virtual characters. It was like stepping into screen roles of a movie. It wasn't real. It was all secretive and undercover and became a world of its own. For a long time, I still pretended to be a straight woman out with her gay friends, because I could not identify easily as a lesbian. Lesbians, I thought, were manly "dakars" as the gay men called them, and all of my friends told me I was way too feminine-looking and acting to be a lesbian. The truth is that I felt so comfortable among my gay friends that I started behaving like them and doing my own "shakhir." If that's what they did to be more like women, I thought, then that's what women do.

Lesbians started to come out slowly in the gay men's clubs. I would occasionally see a lesbian or two who had come along with their gay friends, but they didn't look like me. Again, I thought that only butches could be lesbians, so I buried my own sexuality for a very long time. Over the process of my gay socializing, I was able to meet a larger variety of lesbians, and it was then that I slowly started to accept my own sexuality.

During those days, websites and chatrooms were another of those rare places where gay people could meet. A popular website at the time was Glas.org (Gay & Lesbian Arab Society). It was mostly built by Arab gays living in the West. Their online chat room featured "Yawmiyyet il Gays bi Libnen" (The Diaries of Gays in Lebanon) and that report would include

who performed the best "*shakhs*" at whom, what happened at the gay parties, and who won the drag queen contests. Some frequenters of these parties became legends and would go by the title of "Princesses." Fierce competition would take place between them, and their day-to-day activities would be covered on the site.

On my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, I threw a big party at home and invited all my gay friends. As the party started to end, a group of people there were talking about starting gaylebanon.com. Their plan was to build a site where Lebanese gays and lesbians could meet and find others like themselves. It was the first ray of Lebanese LGBT activism. At the time, it wasn't about reform or changing society; it was mostly about us finding each other. It was about finally understanding that we were not alone in the world. After the site was built, and a yahoogroup was set up, social meetings started taking place in different houses. A #gaylebanon chat room was opened on mIRC, and then one lesbian opened #lesbanon.

"Lesbanon" – that was our joke at the time. It was a word we thought was perfect for the Lebanese lesbian community. Gay girls found it harder to meet up than the men because public places were less open to them, and their nightlife was more restricted by their parents. So they started finding each other by following the gay men. In the #lesbanon chat room, there were about 15 regular lesbian chatters. Sometimes there were more, but usually less. We held our own meetings, which were also social and not very serious. We were always worried about guys coming in to the chat room, pretending to be girls, so we were constantly kicking people out, banning people. We were trying to make the best out of our living conditions at the time, but we were simultaneously always terrified that someone would catch us or out us or put us in jail.

At around the same time, one lesbian couple, who were friends of mine, became role models for us. They lived between Lebanon and Europe and organized parties for a mixed straight-gay crowd in Beirut. They were among the first in Lebanon to introduce the trend of DJ parties, which

has become extremely popular today. The atmosphere at these events was amazing because they were one of those exceptional times when gay and straight people came together to party, dance, and accept each other. It was mostly middle- and upper-class queers who were part of this community, those who could afford the very expensive Internet at the time. Also, in the 90s, cafes weren't so popular. Today, you see them everywhere, but at the time, it was mostly restaurants and nightclubs. And then came Acid.

Acid is widely known to be the gay club of the Middle East. It's even more famous than Helem. I remember Acid when it first opened. It was full of tables and chairs, and it was open every night. It never intended to attract a gay crowd or become a gay club. But homosexuals were big on nightlife at the time, because they had no other way to express their sexuality, so they went to Acid along with all the straight party-goers. The music was great, and the location was conveniently in Sin-el-Fil, home to the gay-friendly BO18 and Orange Mecanique that preceded Acid. So, slowly, the gay men started loving and frequenting that club. Along with the dancing and drinking, a lot of gay cruising spread in and around it. The men got more comfortable dancing with each other and picking each other up. They pushed the tables aside; they just wanted to stand around and meet each other. And the straight crowd started to slowly diminish, opening more space for the gay crowd to take over, until Acid became widely known in the community as the place to be. Online chat rooms promoted the club, and people would go down there to meet their chat partners in person.

The owners were making a lot of money, so they turned a blind eye to its regular gay clients. And in an attempt to bring in more straight couples, they initiated a ladies' night, which soon after became a constant. The main beneficiaries, of course, were the lesbians, who started to flock to Acid in bigger numbers but were still negligible in comparison to the number of gay men.



And so it went for a long time. Nightlife was the only place for "*tinfees*."<sup>2</sup> The general attitude wasn't really about activism; it was about meeting up. And of course, problems arose inside the so-called "community" at the time. The more people we met, the more we found friends and rivals. Fights broke out between people all the time. Some were benign, but some got really serious. People would report each other to the police or out each other to their families. A lot of people were severely depressed and got so lost in their double lives that they became hooked on alcohol or drugs. There were no daytime conversations; everything happened at night. We came to Acid every week with our most basic instincts on our sleeves to let out all the tensions from our daytime closets.

A while after that, a group of LGBT people started something called ClubFree. They scheduled meetings, activities, movie screenings, and remained very undercover. They organized an art exhibit and gave out t-shirts that read "I Exist." I never really joined them. I was too scared that people would find out about me. At the time, police raids of nightclubs were getting more frequent. Drugs were easily available in any nightclub you went to, but the Lebanese government back then used to turn a blind eye to straight clubs that dealt drugs. Then came the wave of linking hard rock music, Satan worshiping, homosexuality, and drugs all together. Based on these ridiculous charges, the government "cracked down" (as the media reported) on clubs and cruising areas that the gay community frequented. Detectives were everywhere, and they managed to instill fear in all of our hearts. We were terrified and terrorized. It is a well-known fact that corrupt security officials blackmailed gay nightclubs for lots of money to stay open. They would "collect" ridiculous amounts of money on a monthly basis.

The fear was huge. We didn't know how to act, and that led to destructive, hidden behavior. People would have sex in cars, act obscenely in clubs,

<sup>2</sup> Venting

or break into horrible fights with each other. I became very judgmental of the gay community's collective behavior, but I knew that the "*mamnou3* was *marghoub*."<sup>3</sup> And so, that was the image that was portrayed to the rest of society. People assumed that homosexuals were only about the sex and the partying because nightlife was the only place where they existed. Everyone got stereotyped. If some gay people abused drugs, it was assumed that everyone gay did drugs, for example.

The only time anything changed was when homosexuals started coming out into the daylight. When Helem came along, they were able to change public perceptions of homosexuality. And when Meem came into existence as a lesbian community, it broke all the unhealthy dynamics that had existed for decades and presented a new, fresh, positive take on the idea of "community." It became normal for lesbians to just be themselves with each other. Now, we meet for coffee, conversations, movies, art – anything. Now, there is no pressure to act or look a certain way in order to get accepted. You are accepted and loved just the way you are. And that did wonders for all of us.

Our thinking has also made giant steps in moving towards improving our own lives. Now, in the Womyn House, we can think twice about things. We're not in a hurry to try to impress each other in the brief, dark moments of a party setting. I've seen the movement firsthand as it developed over the past 15 years, and this space is the healthiest I have ever come across. We have choices now. We have created spaces for our homosexuality without imposing it.

I think this procession was inevitable: moving from secrecy into the public sphere. In the Lebanese context, especially after the civil war, people excessively fixated on going out, drinking, and partying. Whatever straight society did at the time, gay society emulated to a larger extent.

<sup>3</sup> Forbidden fruit is sweet

Because of this, most of us crashed into walls. People got hooked on drugs, on alcohol, they left the country, they got severely depressed and traumatized, they developed internalized homophobia, and it's taking our generation of 30-somethings a lot of work to make a comeback into both the straight world and the gay community today. I don't think the new generation understands the fear that we lived in for decades. We just wanted to belong to something – anything we could find – and we took the good and the bad that came with it.

## TRANSLBANON

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM  
GENDER IDENTITY

ACTIVISM  
COMING OUT

FAMILY

RELATIONSHIPS  
SEXUAL DIVERSITY  
RELIGION

COMMUNITY  
SELF-DISCOVERY  
EMIGRATION



I am a transsexual man and I believe transsexuals are born that way: in the wrong body.

It all started at the age of five. That's when I first discovered that there was something wrong with me. I remember that I would look at myself in the mirror and dislike my body. Somehow I always knew that I should have been born a boy because I have always identified as a boy. As is typical with all babies, your parents dress you up according to your sex. And so, my parents dressed me up in dresses and earrings. I remember hating the earrings to the point where I removed them and threw them away. I got severely punished for doing so, but the pain was a lot more bearable than that of actually having to wear those earrings.

I always nagged at my parents to cut my hair really short. We always fought about my clothes and I would only be content when they let me wear pants. During my childhood, I only played with boys and the pressures I faced were mostly about defying the conventional expectations that my parents had for me as a little girl. But it's always easier to play with the gender boundaries when you're a child. As you grow older, it grows more difficult. Still, as the years passed, the idea that I was actually a boy grew stronger in my head.

When I was seven, I lived through one of the happiest moments of my childhood. As a child, I used to be extremely bothered when people called me by my girl name. One time my dad took me on a *mishwar*<sup>1</sup> and his friend first thought I was a boy and talked to me *bil mozakkar*.<sup>2</sup> *jayyadit* – I was so elated. My dad jokingly said: “Eh, *shifit haydal sabl*!”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An outing

<sup>2</sup> Using masculine terms

<sup>3</sup> You see this boy?

At 13, for the first time in my life, I fell in love with a girl. I increasingly felt like a man, and the pressure from my parents grew. They thought it was “*lilab wled zghar*.”<sup>4</sup> And they were very annoyed. My dad would lock up the closet and give me only girls' clothes. But I never went out dressed as a girl. I was always mad at them. I just wanted them to understand me, but my identity was beyond their understanding.

At school, I was never involved with people and made no friends. I used to mind my own business for fear of bullies. Since I was a kid, I decided that I wanted to be referred to as a boy, in the masculine. I gave myself my boy's name – Charbel, at 8 or 9. But nobody in the *dayza*<sup>5</sup> would call me Charbel. Then my dad became increasingly harsh and would hit me.

At 14, I left home, planning to go find a job, but I was only a *walad*.<sup>6</sup> I went down to Trablus to look for a job. People there started asking me where I was from. In Lebanon, where you're from is always very important. I didn't tell them so that they wouldn't send me back home. It was 8 p.m., and I wasn't used to being out of the *dayza* at this hour of the night. They forcedly took my ID and found out that I was a girl, and so sent me back to my village against my will. They figured I must be crazy. Back home, my family was furious and had gotten the police involved in finding me. Since then, the name Charbel became common in the village, but only because everyone had heard my story and was making fun of me. They started calling me Charbel and heckling me. Society in the village was very cruel. My mom, however, was wonderful. She is one of a kind, but she has no voice in my family, like so many Lebanese mothers. And like so many Lebanese mothers too, she has only ever cared about my happiness, and I love her for that.

At 19, I left home again and traveled southward to Batroun. I found a job working in a cafeteria. My mom would visit me every week or two. Since

<sup>4</sup> Children's play

<sup>5</sup> Village

<sup>6</sup> A boy child

Urban  
vs  
rural  
societies

then, I would always refer to myself as Charbel and never told my story to anyone. I passed for a boy. Nobody could tell that I ever was a girl. I worked for over a year for a very low salary, and that's when I started looking for doctors to do my sex-change operations.

I researched every piece of information I could find. I asked everywhere. I called all sorts of doctors and professors: gland doctors, psychiatrists, gynecologists. My first big lead was a psychiatrist who told me that my case was called "transsexual." It was the first time I heard the word. And I became set on doing a sex-change operation. Of course, many doctors told me it was not doable, and when they said that, I would delete them off my list. I was sure. I somehow knew that it must be possible. I was not going to take no for an answer. After that year and a half in Batroun, I went back home, then the problems came back. Every time problems rose, I would leave. I didn't tell my parents because they would not understand. I tried talking to them a few times, but it was no use. They would not accept me. The best doctor I found was in Beirut, so I felt that Beirut was more open-minded. I looked for a job and a small room there. I needed a job where I didn't have to give my ID to the employer. I started working and trying to see *keef baddi 7ill il ossa*,<sup>7</sup> to gather the money for the operations, and to get them done.

A few years ago, I finally began the sex-change process by getting a chest operation. I'm doing all of them at my own expense, which is why it has taken so long. My psychiatrist sees me once a month because mental health follow-up is very important. He has been helpful. Hormones also need follow-up. If someone takes hormones without doctor supervision, for example, they can fuck up their bodies and their lives. There's no going back once the process has started. I take hormones every 21 days. In the beginning, it was every month, but now I got to a point where it's every 21 days. There's still a long journey to go. *Mishwar taweel*.<sup>8</sup> I'm

<sup>7</sup> How to solve this issue  
<sup>8</sup> Long journey

almost half-way done. I've done one operation and still have two to go. I want people to put themselves in my place to understand me. I don't know many people who do. I feel that my body is wrong. I am a guy. I want my body to be in harmony with my thinking, with my feelings. They might tell me: Why do you need this process? Why don't you save yourself the trouble, the costs, the difficult physical transformation? Why don't you save yourself all that pressure? Because this is the most important thing in life to me: to match my body with my gender. It's my ultimate goal. And I will get there. I am absolutely confident that I will get there. I have never had a single doubt about whether or not I am trans. I never hesitated about any aspect. I've been alone during this whole journey. I got no support from anyone whatsoever. That's why it's important for us, trans people, to support each other. Even financially, I never had any support. If someone had helped me, I would have finished my procedures already. I would be happy already.

I used to write letters to girls, *min b3eed la b3eed*.<sup>9</sup> I want to wait until I'm done with my operations to have a true relationship with a girl. I can only finish them outside Lebanon. Right now, I'm saving up for that. I have to do one more in Lebanon, and to change the gender on my ID to male. It's very hard to change your ID. I know it's going to take a lot of effort. But I know it can be done. After that, I intend to travel to undergo my last operation. I'm not sure where yet. Once I'm done with that, I want to get married. I see myself living in Lebanon. *Baddi ifta7 beit ou assiss bayli*.<sup>10</sup>

Up until a few months ago, I never knew of any other trans people. I mean I knew they existed but didn't know where to meet them. Female-to-male transsexuals like me are even less visible in Lebanon than male-to-female transsexuals. We're definitely not visible on TV and in movies either. But I remember the first time I watched – by total

<sup>9</sup> From a distance; without getting close

<sup>10</sup> I want to have my own house and start a family



coincidence – “Boys Don’t Cry.” I got very emotional because Brandon Teena’s story was very similar to mine.

Only I know mine will have a very different – and much happier – ending.

## INDEPENDENCE

DISCERNMENT  
SELF-ESTEEM  
GENDER IDENTITY

ACTIVISM

COMING OUT

FAMILY

RELATIONSHIPS

SEXUAL DIVERSITY

RELIGION

COMMUNITY

SELF-DISCOVERY

EDUCATION

I've always wanted to be independent. My mother, father, brother, and sister are a tight family, but I don't relate to them in the same way – not that I love them any less. I just feel that I'm not tied to them by the umbilical cord. So from very early on, I was dubbed the black sheep of my family. I questioned things, I didn't take anything for granted, and I developed into a very rebellious, very angry teenager. Because I'm the oldest, my mother didn't know what to expect and our relationship was very tumultuous. I was always pushing boundaries. A lot of it was anger about coming out as a lesbian. It was horrible; if I were my mother, I would've wanted to kill me.

"I'm gay!" I said to myself back then. "And I want to make sure that the rest of the world knows it, and they're gonna like it *ghassbin zannoni*!"<sup>1</sup>

I was on an anger trip that was very much my defense mechanism. If people attack you for anything, you can say: "It's because they're homophobic" or "oh, it's because I'm gay." That's not always a good thing, but, as a teenager, it's a great way to convince yourself that it's not your fault or to exonerate yourself of certain things.

I was also going through a very rough depression then. And I kept drifting away from my mother. What created an even bigger distance between us was the fact that I was sexually active and sleeping with women. *Khalas*,<sup>2</sup> there's this massive part of your life that you can't share anymore. Whatever connection we had before was completely broken, and I couldn't talk to her anymore. Suspicion grew between us. We didn't trust or like each other anymore, and we fought constantly. You can't talk about these things with your mother. It would have been easier if I were going out with men. I mean, yes, it would've still been a

<sup>1</sup> By force; in spite of themselves  
<sup>2</sup> It's over

struggle, but at least I could've talked about it. In fact, when I went out with my first boyfriend, my mother knew. She was upset and fought with me, but it wasn't that big a deal.

Independence, to me, meant living alone. The problem with wanting to be independent here is that, as a woman, *baddik trouzi min beit ahlik la beit jawzik*.<sup>3</sup> *Tab lza ma fee beit jawzik*,<sup>4</sup> what do you do? You stay at your family's house your entire life? In that case, you're not really allowed a life. And so I had made the decision that I did want to live, and I did want to leave my parents' house, but I wasn't able to do it for a very very very long time. It was only now, six months ago, at 29, that I was finally able to move out. During college, I was financially dependent on my parents. When I first started working, I was making my own way, and slowly started to gain bits and pieces of my independence. But at no point then did I think of rocking the boat and leaving the house, because I was so afraid it would completely devastate my mother. She just wouldn't be able to deal with it.

The shift really happened when I had to start financially supporting my parents. Then, all of a sudden, I had this insane amount of power. I didn't realize anything had changed until the way my mother dealt with me started changing. When I was 25, she would still be asking me where I was going and what time I was coming back. I still freaked out about sleeping outside of the house. If I slept over at a friend's, I would wake up at 4am and go home. The important thing is to be there before 6am: before my dad woke up. Two years later, as soon as the money dynamic shifted, there were no more questions. *La wein jeyi, wala wein rayza, wala shee*.<sup>5</sup> The measure of control she had over me completely shifted into my hands. She couldn't bother me anymore. What could she possibly do? Not give me an allowance? Kick me out of the house? She knew that was already what I wanted. *Khalas*, when you're not financially dependent on your parents anymore, it makes all the difference.

<sup>3</sup> You have to go from your parents' house to your husband's house.

<sup>4</sup> So, if there is no husband's house.

<sup>5</sup> *Rayza*: where are you coming from, 'no 'where are you going,' nothing.



But still, my guilt complex stayed. Still, I couldn't leave the house. I couldn't make that decision. It was bad enough that I was never going to get married to a man and give her grandchildren. In the meantime, my brother and sister had both traveled to work abroad, so she was completely alone and very lonely at home. What was I going to do? Break her heart? It was always guilt that held me back.

One day, out of the blue, my friend, who was staying in a very nice apartment in Beirut had to leave the country and offered that I take his apartment. My immediate reaction was: Yes! But the real decision dragged on for weeks. It was too good of an offer to pass, so I finally summoned up the courage to tell my mother. I expected World War III. I told her that my friend was moving out and I was going to take his apartment. No reaction. I continued speaking for a few minutes, still expecting war. Nothing happened. I was extremely (but pleasantly) surprised at her anti-climactic reaction. I guess all those years of preparing her psychologically for the big move had paid off. It had shielded her from the shock. A few days later, after it had properly sunk in, she gave me the much-expected guilt trip: "You want to run away from me... it's all because of me... *ma bit7ibbeeni... baddik tkibbeeni 3al tareez bass khatyir...*"<sup>6</sup> But at that point, my decision was final. I had to do this.

It was still important for me, even after my financial independence, to have my own place. I don't own my parents' house. It will never be my space. I didn't build it. It's a collective space. It's not something I have complete freedom to use. It's not somewhere I can start building a life because I can't completely be myself in that space. It's too connected to my childhood. My room is one I share with my sister. We have two beds and a green carpet and stuffed animals on the wall. It's too tied to a specific dynamic that I have with my parents, and, at some point, you just need something new. You need something that's your own. Even the

<sup>6</sup> you don't love me... you're going to throw me on the streets when I grow old..

process of going out and doing your own grocery shopping is the most liberating experience.

I've moved to two apartments since, and my mother still uses her guilt tactics every now and then. She needs to learn that they have no effect on me. In reality, they do, but she needs to learn that they don't. I actually don't think she really means the things she says. I think it becomes second nature, this victim stance of the martyred mother: "*Ana yalli da77eit, bitkhalfi wled ou bitkibbiyon la barra, bitkhalfi wled ou bitkibbiyon la barra!*"<sup>7</sup> I'm like: "Well, what do you want me to do?!"

She's very lonely, my mom. She raised her children, and now she's just very lonely and very bored. She also has a massive fear of abandonment. Her other children don't pose my kind of threat to her because they're the good ones. They're in the Gulf, working. It's not that they left her because they "hate" her. It would have been easier for me to leave the country than to move across the street. It's ridiculous but true. And there's the whole issue of "what would people say?" She made a huge fuss about that. She's constantly afraid of being accused with "*7az 3laykl... inti ma 3rifti trabbiya.*"<sup>8</sup>

Oddly enough, my relationship with my mother has actually become a lot better since I moved out. Now, when we see each other, it's on purpose. We sit together and talk, as opposed to before, when I would just come into the house, walk into my room, and close the door. I see her every week. She visits me in my apartment and gets me plants. Sometimes, she cooks for me. It's pretty cute. Every Sunday, she comes to my house with breakfast; we have a *sob7iyyi*,<sup>9</sup> and then she leaves.

I still have to ask my girlfriend to leave the apartment early on Sunday. But hey, independence comes in slow, tiny, baby steps. Sometimes children have to be the patient, reassuring ones with their parents.

<sup>7</sup> I, who sacrificed so much! You give birth to children and you throw them to the world, you give birth to children and you throw them to the world!

<sup>8</sup> It's your fault... you didn't know how to raise her.

<sup>9</sup> Morning chit-chat over coffee

## THE MOTORCYCLE GENDER

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM  
GENDER IDENTITY

COMING OUT  
FAMILY

Everyone loves a girl on a motorcycle. "You're cool, even though you're a Muslim." That's what one girl at my university said.

When I went to university on my big bike, it was part of my character. I was the "cool girl." I counted on my bike to give me my tough girl appearance. I wore leather a lot and colored my hair. I used to wear black eyeliner. I wouldn't talk to anyone unless they were courageous enough to come up and talk to me. Female masculinity is praised in our society if you have a bike. If you don't have one, it's less applauded.

When you're a masculine woman and a dyke, straight guys don't know how to talk to you. They're lost. They're only used to talking to girls in a certain way. When there's a motorcycle, they know what to talk about. We talk about engines and speed. Straight guys embrace you when you have a bike. They help you and teach you. Sometimes they are relieved they don't have to perform their sexuality in front of me.

Motorcycles are related to masculinity somehow. You need focus, orientation, direction, and strength. They are fast and dangerous – and dirty. On my bike, I played with gender. I had a nickname: "khanjar," meaning dagger. With my helmet on, nobody would know if I was a girl or a boy. Everybody would speak to me as if I were a man. Sometimes I corrected them, sometimes I didn't. I enjoyed it. It was a bit scary but exciting. A bike makes you feel so powerful, free, and in control.

And sometimes, there's a girl behind you. On Sundays, I took girls on dates for a drive in the mountains. I wouldn't just say "come with me;" I would say "come with me on the bike!"



I was still at school when I bought my first motorcycle. I got it to heal a heartache. It was kind of my "coming out" too. Out of the blue, my girlfriend left me. We were in love. She shut down suddenly. When I tried to understand what was going on, she said she wanted to get married and have kids. She said it wasn't right that we were two girls doing what we were doing. "You're not a man," she said. The first thing I did was cut my hair because she really liked it. I was broken-hearted. I wanted to say "fuck femininity." I knew the short hair would cause major problems for me at home and school, and it did.

I started saving money to buy a motorcycle. I knew she would feel bad that she wouldn't be able to ride with me. So I bought my first bike, a Kawasaki 250. It was a big sports bike. I had to lean forward on the engine. I started wearing one earring and looking like a small boy. My teachers freaked out about my short hair. My mom began yelling at me: "You look like an 'I don't know what.'" One time, she lost her temper and finally said: "You're starting to look like a lesbian!"

Returning home from Paris one summer, I knew I would be in deep trouble at the airport. Firstly, my parents had discovered I had a motorcycle. I never drove in front of the house but somebody in the neighborhood must have seen me and told them in my absence. Secondly, I had gained seven kilos over the summer, and I knew that my mom especially would not like that, because she was always coming down really hard on me about my weight. To top it all off, I had cut my hair even shorter than the first time. The minute after I arrived, my mom tore the hat off my head. She gave me a nasty look. "Follow me!" she yelled.

I didn't have the courage or will to fight. I was still at school and dependent on my parents. I didn't want trouble. I also couldn't defend their "motorcycles are dangerous" argument. I was barely 18 at that time and I couldn't stand up for my homosexuality, which was implicitly being

targeted in the motorcycle issue. My parents always had a problem with my gender. Though they never said so explicitly, the motorcycle brought my gender into plain view. "Why do you have a motorcycle, when we bought you a car?"

They made a lot of effort to see me wear dresses and skirts or to buy more "feminine" clothes. I got plenty of negative comments all the time about the way I looked. I was only complimented when I dressed more "feminine." In Lebanon, femininity is so exaggerated. You're made to feel like you're ugly when you're a masculine woman here. It starts with your un-plucked eyebrows. And your skin. Everyone feels entitled to comment or interfere to "correct" the situation. I have a terror of beauty salons. Every time I go in for a haircut, the hairdressers want to do my eyebrows and more. They want me to conform to norms of feminine beauty.

Women in high heels are taller, so you always have to look at them from below. You feel small and ugly. Feminine women in Lebanon are shiny and "clean" all the time. Beauty for women here is always related to some sort of cleanliness. All my life my mom has always looked at my eyebrows and skin and said "*Nyaz! zaraf*. That's so disgusting! Your face needs cleaning!" Recently, I was in the car with my family, we were heading to the beach, and they noticed that I hadn't shaved my armpits completely. My mom and my brother both started yelling "Oh my god, what the fuck is that? That's disgusting!"

Once a girlfriend told me she loved my eyebrows, that they were her favorite part of me. I was shocked because it's a strange comment for anyone to give. But the shock was also because I've always been made to feel ashamed about my unplucked eyebrows. I have kind of adopted a "wild" look now. I've grown out my hair. I feel free from femininity, from plucking my eyebrows and applying all those creams. Sometimes I feel great; I feel sexy and non-conformist. But in a blink of a second all that

can disappear. I can get into an elevator with women in high heels and botox and, suddenly, I can feel like shit again.

Weddings, in particular, are very difficult for me. It's impossible for me to go as I am, as a butch. I have to become a transvestite. It makes me feel like a slut. I'm half naked. Everybody touches me. I'm supposed to be excited about it. I'm supposed to be nice and smile. Sometimes I enjoy the performance. Men become completely stupid when they're talking to you. When you walk, all eyes are on you, just because you're wearing heels and a dress. It's amazing. What I enjoy most at weddings is taking my camera. It makes it easier for me. That way I reclaim the glance somehow. The camera and the bike are coping mechanisms for me.

I haven't had my own motorcycle since I was 22. That was seven years ago. I went to a yoga class the other day. There was a bunch of femmy girls there. One girl approached me and asked me my name. Then she asked me my last name. "Wow! I've heard of you!" she exclaimed. At first I thought it was because she knew of my work as an artist. Then she said, "This is so cool! I want to get a motorcycle too!" And she started to ask me for advice on buying a bike for herself – and for her mom, who wants a bike too.

## HOPE

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM

GENDER GENDER

IDENTITY

COMING OUT

FAMILY

RELATIONSHIPS

SEXUAL DIVERSITY

POI-OSM

COMMUNITY

SELF-DISCOVERY

EMERGENCY



*This is the first time I tell this story.*

I have lived one of those crazy lives you are reluctant to believe even exist except in movies and magazines. And I'm only 22. I first realized I was a lesbian when I was 16. And so, I broke up with the only boyfriend I ever had. I was feeling a new sense of meaning in my life, having finally figured out why I was different from all the other girls in my class. My boyfriend, however, didn't take the news very well. He had been very frustrated with my lack of attraction towards him and my unwillingness to do anything sexual with him. One night, we were having another violent break-up fight and he sexually assaulted me. It would happen many times after that.

It's weird how I say it straightforwardly now: I was raped and I got pregnant. It feels like a hundred years have passed. I ran to my parents for help and they put me in therapy at the American University Hospital for a year. Yet, I never got to talk about the rape itself. I was just put on medication. I gave birth to a baby girl, and immediately became severely depressed. It was a downhill crash from that point on.

*I don't know how to tell this story.*

After giving birth, I registered in college and moved into a dormitory. I didn't want to see or talk to my parents. My sister took my child in as her own. In college, I met my first lesbian. From our first conversation, I was totally fascinated by her. She was looking for a roommate and I moved in with her. I thought that I could forget myself and my life in this new lesbian world. But it wasn't that simple. She was heavily involved in drugs and I quickly followed. It started with hash and cocaine, and then

heroin. For almost two years, my life just slipped away between drugs and sex. Money was never a problem; my parents sent me lots of it. It started at 18 as a form of experimentation and trying new things and I stayed hooked on drugs till I was 20.

I kept getting myself into trouble till my parents found out about my drug abuse. They brought me back to the North to stay with them and get treatment. The rehab was absolute hell for me. There was – again – no talking involved, just lots of medications. I stayed in the hospital for four months. I had to stop school for a year. I was completely isolated from the world: no friends and no support system. It's been two years that I've been clean, but I am still on medication for depression today. You just can't stand up and shake it all off – what happened in those four years. I wish I could. People judge me for it all the time.

After I got better and moved back to Beirut, I made peace with my parents. Despite everything, I was appreciative of the love that they gave me the best way they knew how. The hardest thing I probably had to do was extricate my sexual identity from all the damaging things I got involved in. There is already a misconception that lesbianism is synonymous with drugs, with alcohol, with promiscuity, with eroticism. In my case, it just so happened that that's the world I was introduced to through my first girlfriend. It was a distorted relationship and it distorted my idea of lesbianism. After we broke up, I refused to get emotionally attached to anyone for a long time. But I know it wasn't my sexuality that brought about all the difficulties in my life. It could have happened to anyone: gay or straight.

*I don't know why I'm telling this story.*

Things are much better now; my life is much better. My sister adopted my baby and is raising her as her own. She's four years old now and she thinks I'm her aunt. Everyone tells me she looks exactly like me – and

she does! I love her so much. She is all the strength I will ever need. She's happy, she's healthy, and I see her all the time. She is getting lots of love from my whole family.

I wonder all the time if one day she will understand what I went through, if she will blame me or if she will forgive me. I love her so much. I wonder if she will accept that her mother is a lesbian. Many times during those four years I wanted to kill myself. I longed for a peaceful death away from all the troubles in my life. But I chose life because of her, because she loved me unconditionally. There's nothing else that would have saved me. It's odd for me to be telling my story with a twist of hope to it, because for a long time, I didn't have any hope. When you find yourself longing for suicide, when you just want to die, find something. Find anything that you want to live for and hold onto it with your last drop of life. My baby was mine.

The past still haunts me, but the more time passes and the more I grow, the more good friends I find to love and support me. There's no point in imprisoning yourself in victimhood forever. I am what I am: I made mistakes along the way, but I am stronger and wiser now.

*I am finally able to tell this story.*

## BUTCH

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM  
GENDER IDENTITY

COMMUNITY



The very first time I went to meet another lesbian, I was completely horrified. We had first met online in the #gaylebanon chatroom on mIRC and had talked for a few months before she suggested to set up a meeting. "Meeting" was the technical word for, well, meeting other gay people at the time. "*3milit meeting hal jim3a*"<sup>1</sup> people would say, or "*3indi meeting ma3o*."<sup>2</sup> It was scary as hell. You never knew what or who to expect, and the dynamics were always severely awkward. I had heard a lot of my gay male friends talking about "meetings" and boasting about how many they did per week. It mostly had the connotation of sexual encounters. So when the lesbian I had met online suggested a meeting, I was worried with the pressure of sex. The truth is that I desperately wanted to be in love with her – as she was the only other lesbian who talked to me. What's more is that I wished she was beautiful, and the greater truth is that I wished that somehow she would find me beautiful.

But "beautiful" was an adjective so alien to my image of myself that I never thought it possible that anyone would ever find me attractive. Butch women are not beautiful. How I loathed the word "butch," and how I ran away from identifying as such. Everybody I met online asked me (after asking "a/s/l") if I were butch or femme. Instinctively I would answer that I didn't know, pretending to be ignorant of the very famous distinction. Femmes were girly, soft, sensitive, had long hair, and wore feminine clothes. They were beautiful and sexy. Butches were the opposite; they wore manly clothes, had short hair, acted in macho ways, had loud voices, and were fat. Butches were ugly. These were the ideas strongly engraved in my head. Those were the rules of the lesbian community.

<sup>1</sup> I had a 'meeting' with someone this week.

<sup>2</sup> I have a 'meeting' with him

I remember one conversation with an online lesbian that stuck for years in my head. "Why would lesbians feel attracted to manly women?" she said. "Then they would just be attracted to men. Lesbians like women because of their femininity." And because I had short hair, dressed in baggy jeans and loose t-shirts, and was overweight, I was a butch despite myself. And therefore I was ugly.

Waiting for my online lesbian acquaintance that afternoon on Bliss Street, I wished to God that she was femme. How horrible, I thought, if she were butch like me. The possibility of lesbian friendship was alien to me at the time. Any other lesbian was either a possible love interest or competition.

The meeting was, like I had predicted, horrible. She was indeed feminine-looking, but she didn't like me at all. The hour-long awkward silence was interrupted only by small talk and a futile attempt at making jokes. I had no idea what to talk about. After that meeting, we never spoke or saw each other again. My already low self-esteem plummeted even further down.

I began to change my appearance, consciously. I stopped cutting my hair short. I grew my fingernails and put nail polish on. I tightened up my clothes. I tried putting makeup on a few times. And I went to a meeting a couple of months later looking like a very funny butch-trying-to-be-feminine chick. This time, the girl I met was also butch, but far more comfortably so. Excellent! I thought. Now she can fall in love with me because I am girly. Yes, that was how shallowly obsessed I was with my gender appearance. I felt a lot more confident and did more talking that time. It was a very pleasant conversation. She was a delightful person, and unlike me, quite in tune with herself, and that single conversation made me feel so much better about myself than any other hour in my entire life.

"So ayya style bit7lbbi bli banet?"<sup>3</sup> I asked.

"Ma btifroz."<sup>4</sup>

"Eh, bass meen byijizblk aktar, il femme walla il butch?"<sup>5</sup>

She smiled. "I don't like these divisions," she said.

"Yes, neither do I," I replied, hoping it could be true, but knowing it wasn't.

"What do you consider yourself?" she asked.

"Ana kteer b7ibb koun feminine, ou b7ibb il blnit tkoun butch ou 7emli masszouliyyi."<sup>6</sup>

She laughed. "Shou khass 7emli masszouliyyi bil butch?"<sup>7</sup>

I felt awkward, and she could see it. She explained to me that butches and femmes are just replications of traditional society's male / female rules, and that it was actually stupid of us to follow them. Although I was entirely convinced, I dismissed her thinking as unrealistic and naïve. That's not how it was in reality. But we became instant friends – my first ever lesbian friendship! And I was delighted every time we had a conversation about anything related to sexual identity. I listened to her passionately, hoping that one day I would believe the same things she did.

Still, I kept thinking about what she said, and my personal journey towards self-acceptance began. I badly wanted to see myself as cool, as beautiful. I wanted to be the butch woman I really was and not be overwhelmingly embarrassed by it. But wanting to feel something and actually feeling it are totally separate things, and the path between them is long and exhausting and difficult.

<sup>3</sup> What style of girls are you attracted to?

<sup>4</sup> Doesn't matter.

<sup>5</sup> Yes, but who do you find more attractive? Femmes or butches?

<sup>6</sup> I really like being feminine, and I like butch girls who are responsible.

<sup>7</sup> What does being responsible have to do with being butch?

As the months passed, I found myself repeating my friend's argument to other people, and challenging their views on butch / femme dichotomies. But in my heart, I still wouldn't believe it. And then the insecurities increased when I started dating other girls – all of which were femmes. I could still not bring myself to find a butch woman attractive. I simply could not believe that someone could fall in love with me or find me beautiful. I took offense when my girlfriend called me beautiful. It just felt like she was lying to me.

"How do you measure masculinity in a woman?" my friend asked me one day.

"By her looks and her behavior," I replied.

"Then what about the girls who look very feminine but act really masculine? What do you call those?"

I thought about it for a minute then said: "Femmes. It's the appearance that matters more than anything."

"Why so?"

"Cos society is made up of men and women, and it's the same for lesbian societies: We've got our own versions of men and women."

"And what if those gender divisions are a problem in themselves? The idea of absolutist terms of 'man' and 'woman'?"

It took years of similar conversations for me to understand the problem with gender stereotyping and the bigger problem of duplicating those in the lesbian community. Today, whenever the topic comes up, I advocate strongly for erasing the butch / femme boxes. But the greatest battle of all was erasing them in my own head. I'm still trying to see myself as beautiful.



# YA 7AYAWENI

DISCRIMINATION  
 SELF-ESTEEM  
 GENDER IDENTITY  
 ACTIVISM  
 COMING OUT  
 FAMILY  
 RELATIONSHIPS  
 SEXUAL DIVERSITY  
 RELIGION  
 COMMUNITY  
 SELF-DISCOVERY  
 EMIGRATION

*Ya 7ayaweni*<sup>1</sup>

My father has a bad temper.

One day, a girl came back home with me after school. We were sitting on the floor of my bedroom, kissing. My father walked in on us, did not say a word, and asked the girl to leave.

Then he beat me up with his fists and his belt and his cane. *Ya woskha, ya khiryi. Skiti a7san ma lksor eedi 3ala wijjik. Khrassi ya 7ayaweni. Ma bkoun bayyik lza ma bfarjeeki ya sharmouta. Yil3an il se3a illi khil2ti fya.*<sup>2</sup>

I begged him to stop. I begged like I never thought I would beg in my life. I cried out please please, *khalas*<sup>3</sup>, please. I screamed with all my lungs: *Baaabbbbaaaaaaaa!*

*Khrassi*<sup>4</sup>! he said and he beat me. *Ma ra7 tit3allami gheir la ozobrik. lza ba3d marra bshoufik 3am tittalla3i bi blnit, baddi l2ia3lik 3younik ou jfdighlik dmeghik ya kalbi.*<sup>5</sup>

I begged and I pleaded. No human being should ever have to plead for anything, especially not from her own father. It's been eight years since. He broke so much more than my arm that day. Every time I remember the way I pleaded for him to stop, I start crying and I can't stop.

<sup>1</sup> You Animal

<sup>2</sup> You dirty piece of shit. Shut up before I break my fist on your face. Shut up, you animal. I wouldn't be your father if I didn't show you, you whore. I curse the hour that you were born.

<sup>3</sup> Enough

<sup>4</sup> Shut the fuck up.

<sup>5</sup> You will not learn your lesson unless I bury you. If I ever again see you doing so much as looking at a girl, I will pluck out your eyes and break your skull, You bitch.

## WE LIVE IN A RUTHLESS SOCIETY

DISCRIMINATION

SEX & ESTEEM

GENDER IDENTITY

ACTIVISM

COMING OUT  
FAMILY

RELATIONSHIPS

SEXUAL DIVERSITY

RELIGION

COMMUNITY

SEX & DISCOVERY

EVOLUTION

I made the mistake of coming out to my family and now I am homeless as a result.

It all started two years ago when my girlfriend came to visit me at home. My mother quickly noticed her butch clothes and mannerisms and got very uncomfortable. She took me aside and asked furiously: "*Inti wi7dl min haydol?*"<sup>1</sup> referring of course to lesbians. I instinctively said yes, and she left in a huff. But generally, she didn't seem too troubled by the thought. She didn't talk to me about it later or cause me any problems. I guess she didn't take me seriously. I thought at the time that her reaction was actually more positive than that of most parents'. But as the months passed, I realized that I was terribly mistaken.

My mother has always linked lesbianism to drugs and perversions. How can she not, when the commonly used Arabic word for it is "*shouzouz*."<sup>2</sup> Lately, an Arab television talk show featured an episode about homosexuality with expert opinions from psychologists, sociologists, and health professionals. I got so excited about it and I wanted my mother to watch it, hoping that it would help change her mentality. So I tuned in to the show in the living room. But the moment she saw it, she got very angry and kicked me out of the room. And so, I went into my bedroom and turned on the TV there. But she was still enraged. She went into a frenzy, shutting down all the windows and curtains in the house and yelling at me to turn the volume down. She was so embarrassed and disgusted and told me that I must throw these ideas out of my head, that they were perverted thoughts. I tried to explain to her that these were expert psychologists talking about how homosexuality is perfectly normal, and she told me that I was the one who needed a *real* psychologist.

<sup>1</sup> You're one of those people?

<sup>2</sup> Deviance



My mother thinks I'm a lesbian because I am overweight. She thinks I cannot find a man to love me so I seek love from women. And, like most Lebanese mothers, she cannot be quiet about anything. She just had to go ahead and tell my whole family. I am the youngest child. My sister used to call me "lezbo" as a joke when I was younger because I was inseparable from my best friend. Like my other sister, when she found out I was gay, she told me she was fine with it. But both of them also assumed that it was for the lack of a man that I was a lesbian. They thought that if I made a little more effort with the way I dressed and acted, I could easily land myself a husband.

With my brother, things were very different. He lives in Africa, so I chat with him online. Once we were talking about downtown Beirut and he told me a story about how a gay man hit on him one night when he was walking through Nejme Square with his wife. We joked about it and he asked me if I would tolerate girls hitting on me. I told him I wouldn't have a problem with that and he agreed that homosexuality is no big deal. So I took the chance and came out to him. He immediately said to me: "*Inti ikhti ou ana b7ibbik keef ma kinti.*"<sup>3</sup> It was the dream response anyone wishes for when coming out: I love you unconditionally. This was over a year ago. I saw him more recently when he visited Lebanon and we talked more about it. He was still supportive, but he asked me not to tell people because we live in a ruthless society. "*Mojtamazna ma byir7am,*"<sup>4</sup> he said.

So recently, two years after I first came out to my mother, she comes to me and says that someone told her that they saw me drunk somewhere with my "lez-bi-yan" friends. She was yelling at me hysterically that lesbians are drug addicts and disgusting people. It's amazing what societal pressure can do to people. She was close to having a nervous breakdown and decided she was going to find me a husband and force me to get married. She said all the traditional horrible things parents

say: that I was an embarrassment, that she wished she never had me, that I was ruining her life. I tried to make her understand that I had been through a lot of struggles, including suicidal thoughts, before I reached a place where I was comfortable with who I was. But she would not listen to me. I think she wished that I had indeed killed myself, that I was dead, rather than being a lesbian.

That same fight grew and escalated over days and nights, until my mother was threatening me violently and becoming increasingly abusive. Some days ago, she kicked me out of the house, and I have been staying over at friends' homes since. She hasn't even called me yet. It's funny how at the beginning I thought my coming out to my mother was successful and positive. I guess fear of society eventually got the best of her. My brother said Lebanese societies were ruthless. He was right.

<sup>3</sup> You're my sister and I love you no matter what.

<sup>4</sup> Our society is cruel and merciless.

## THE RECYCLE BIN

WELL-BEING  
SELF-ESTEEM  
GENDER IDENTITY  
RELIGION

COMING OUT  
FAMILY

RELATIONSHIPS  
SEXUAL ORIENTATION  
RELIGION  
COMMUNITY

SELF-DISCOVERY

EDUCATION

Nineteen years is how long I've been married. Growing up, I don't ever remember using the word "gay" or "lesbian." In fact, I don't remember using any word to describe homosexuality. I didn't even know that "louti" meant "faggot;" I assumed it was just another curse word.

I loved women, but it was unthinkable at the time that two women could actually be together romantically or build a relationship with each other. I didn't actually think I was any different from other girls. I thought that everyone had similar feelings to mine but never talked about them.

I got married at 24 to a bright and handsome young man I met at the Lebanese University where we both studied. We dated for a brief time and felt so comfortable together that we found ourselves soon discussing marriage. My parents loved him, and so did I. There was no question in my head that I was doing the right thing. Our relationship was healthy and supportive from the start. We both wanted to have children right away, so five months after our wedding, I got pregnant with a baby boy. Over the next five years, I gave birth to two more baby girls. It was the family I had always dreamed of. I like to think that I've been a good mother. I hope I've been a good mother.

For the first 15 years of my marriage, I was totally immersed in raising my kids and taking care of the household. My husband was a hard-working and honest businessman, and he got promoted quickly. Anyone who observed our home from the outside, or even from the inside, could see that we were a typical middle-class, tightly knit family. Our children are happy and they all do well at school. We have big hopes for them. My son wants to become a computer engineer, my daughter wants to become a musician, and my youngest daughter wants to be a doctor.



During all this time, I still believed that all women felt special affection towards other women. In my head, it was a form of sisterhood, of friendship. I was very loving towards my neighbor, for example. I loved seeing her, talking to her. I got very excited every time she rang my doorbell. I would become upset every single time she had to leave to look after her kids or her husband. But I never called it love. I called her my best friend. "zazeezi kteer zala albi."<sup>1</sup>

Some years ago, my sister and I were watching TV when some program mentioned homosexuality. "Sheyfi bi amerka shou fee zindon? Rjel homosexuals bitjawwaz rjel."<sup>2</sup> I was immediately taken aback. I joked and said "ma hinni il rjel byltjawwazo shou ma ken."<sup>3</sup>

"Laz ou niswen kamen, al byonghormo bi bazd."<sup>4</sup>

I felt a strange thump in my heart, and was silent, staring at the television screen. "Haydi ekhirt il dini,"<sup>5</sup> she said. I wished that she would leave so that I could concentrate on the program, but she didn't.

For many months, that was the only thing I could think about. I felt guilty and my guilt manifested itself in more loving behavior towards my children and my husband. But inside me, I was baffled by the thought that something like homosexuality existed. And yet I found it hard to think of the possibility that I was like those people, that they meant anything at all to me. But I was extremely curious, and I didn't want it to show.

I started looking for signs of homosexuality anywhere on the television during the daytime when my kids went to school. I bought a small TV set and put it in the kitchen. For months, I was looking for those signs. Sometimes the word "shazz"<sup>6</sup> would pass quickly in the Arabic subtitles of a movie. It would make my heart stop. I started paying attention to Western entertainment shows lest they mention anything to do with

homosexuality. I saw a brief news flash of Elton John marrying his boyfriend. It made my heart race and my eyes tear up.

The more obsessed I became with the topic, the guiltier I felt. Why was I thinking so much about homosexuality? What did it have to do with me? Could I be a homosexual? That is impossible. I am happily married with three amazing kids! The feeling ate at my soul and I started to loathe myself.

During that year, I tried to keep the idea out of my head, battling with it constantly. The devil is messing with my mind, I thought, the devil of homosexuality. I would stare at my son's computer sitting there in his room. The vast great world of the Internet stared right back at me. With a few clicks, I could learn more about homosexuality. If only I knew how to click, I could ask my son to teach me. I could look for things while he was at school. But what if he found out? The horror of him finding out. How do you hide these things? I heard him once talk about a "recycle bin." What if you couldn't remove anything ever? What if it kept coming back like those fake candles of birthday cakes that light up again no matter how hard you blow? What if something remained as stark proof of the horrible thing that you had done? I could say I was researching for something. But what would I be researching for? I am just a simple housewife. Housewives don't research.

I toyed with the idea of telling someone. Mostly, I dreamed of telling her. I would day-dream about it for hours, and in my dream, she would understand. I became increasingly tense around her, looking more at the floor than straight into her face. I would make up excuses like needing flour to go knock on her door. I could feel all of my sexuality rushing to the tips of my fingers as I curved them up and knocked. How ridiculous I was, I thought to myself. How shameful.

<sup>1</sup> She's very dear to my heart.

<sup>2</sup> See what they have in America?

<sup>3</sup> Homosexual men marrying other men.

<sup>4</sup> Well, men would marry anything.

<sup>5</sup> No, it's women too. How ridiculous, they say they fall in love with each other.

<sup>6</sup> This is the end of the world.

<sup>7</sup> Pervert / Deviant

More months passed, and then more years. Nobody who knew me had any idea about all the day-dreams going through my head. I dreamt of telling someone, meeting someone like me, telling my family, telling my neighbor. In the privacy of my own mind, I gave my dreams happy endings. But they never came close to touching with reality. I didn't want them to. They remained in my head, locked up and safe from shameful public scrutiny, until the unthinkable happened.

I was walking down a hospital hallway – I can't remember what I was there for – when a "clinical psychologist" sign hanging on a door grabbed me by the throat. Of all the scenarios I had played out in my head for years, I had not once thought of talking to a psychologist. Instinctively, I knew that they had the answer. They could tell me about homosexuality. I walked in and asked to speak to a psychologist. Ninety minutes later, I was ushered into a young woman's office. I told her I was concerned that a friend of mine might be homosexual. She told me it was perfectly normal. I was fighting back the tears. "But how can my friend live like this?" I asked, "Are there other homosexuals in Lebanon?" "Yes," she said. "There are many lesbians in Lebanon – like anywhere else in the world."

Lesbians! I thought, so that's what they call them. "How can she know for sure if she's lesbian?" I asked.

"You just do," she replied, and I knew exactly what she meant and how mistaken she was.

"There's a group of lesbians in Beirut who run a confidential support group," she added. "I know someone there. Here's her number. Maybe your friend would like to contact them."

In what seemed like the slowest few seconds of my life, she wrote down a number for me on a piece of paper.

It took me eight days to release myself from the paralysis of fear and call the number. I rehearsed all the intelligent things I would say over and over again in my head. I made up scenarios for why I was calling and who my imaginary homosexual friend was.

When the person answered at the other end of the line, the words just jumped out of my mouth "*Mar7aba, ana lesbian.*"

I wanted to end my story here, but my interviewer said people would really want to know what happened afterwards. "That was the most defining, most liberating moment of my life," I answered. Deep down I knew that was all I really wanted: to tell someone that I was a lesbian. Maybe what I really wanted to do was tell myself that I was a lesbian.

I would never leave my husband or my children. I love them way more than I love myself or could ever love any woman. They are my life. All I ever did afterwards was meet another lesbian who became a friend. I always ask her questions about homosexuality: What are lesbians like? How do they live? Are there any of them like me? Sometimes I tell her about my kids. She's there for me when I need to talk. And all I ever needed to do was talk to someone who knows me.

*Mar7aba, ana lesbian.*

---

"Hello, I am a lesbian."



## TRANSGENDER NOT TRANSLUCENT

DISCRIMINATION

GENDER IDENTITY

FAMILY

RELIGION

SELF-DISCOVERY  
EMIGRATION

I never identified as gay. Even as a kid, at 10, when I had feelings for a girl, I always knew I wasn't gay. In my head, I never pictured myself as a woman with another woman. In my head, I had short hair and a muscular body. I was male. I loved girls, and that made me heterosexual. It never crossed my mind that I may be a lesbian.

I explain it the same way to gays as I do to straight people. I want gays and lesbians to understand what a transgender person is. Most lesbians don't want to accept a woman that would want to undergo a sex change. *Why can't you just be proud of being a woman?* It's never real harassment from the gay community, but just ignorance that I shrug off.

With straight people, in the beginning, it was more frustrating. When I had a piercing, or when my face didn't look completely male, they would stop me and ask if I'm male or female. I've been followed and chased before. People on the bus talk about me and wonder what my gender is. Strangers ask me how old I am and if I really am a boy. It's mostly verbal abuse.

Though I correct them, I don't care anymore if people mistake me for a girl. I think you get used to it and you become stronger with time. I believe people always know if they're transgender or not. I realized it at five or six. It hits you at a very young age. That's also what the research says. But when it comes to transitioning or coming out, it depends on how you've been raised and the community that you live in. When you're not willing to change how you feel and hide it from your parents, it becomes a physical, visible transformation. You can't hide the hormones and facial hair and deeper voice as an FTM transsexual. Lesbians can

hide things better. For lesbians, marriage is an issue, pressure is an issue. With transpeople, the minute you put your mind to going through with it, dealing with people becomes almost inevitable, especially your parents.

For those who choose to transition, a noticeable mood change can be seen with testosterone. It's similar to a 13-year-old boy just hitting puberty. For one, the sex drive becomes unbearable. But within a year the hormones balance themselves out. And though you stay on testosterone all your life to make up for your missing testicles, some people stop injections eventually and start taking pill forms of testosterone. The physical transformation is difficult. There's a high risk of cancer and other diseases, so you need to get blood tests done regularly.

As soon as I get back to NY, I'm going to start transitioning. I would do the operations in Lebanon, but there are a couple of things stopping me. If I start transitioning now, I'd have a beard and deeper voice, and I wouldn't be able to pass through the airport as a female, as my ID highlights.

In 2006, I was seeing a girl who messed up my head. I was in love with her for a while, but I couldn't tell her about it. She was a diehard Christian, and she refused to accept me as transgender or herself as a lesbian, even though we were together. She broke up with me in July 2006. Something snapped that day. I had my first real epiphany.

When I was in high school, I saw something about transgenders on "Oprah;" I related to the kids she had brought on the show. But my mom and sisters were in the room, so I felt embarrassed. I was turning red. I thought, *oh great, they're going to figure it out, they're going to know, what's wrong with me.* So I quickly changed the channel. I went to my room. I purposefully avoided it. In my head, I thought, *wow, I'm not the only one!*

Throughout my life I was unable to tell anyone that I felt trapped in the wrong body. *They will send me to a hospital. My mom would kill me.* So when I saw others like me on TV, I thought, *I'm not crazy. I will figure it out.*

So the night of the breakup, my family and I were watching TV. There was a show with a transsexual plot: a male teacher was transitioning to become female. I was watching my mom the whole time, hiding in the corner. Suddenly, she looked at me and said, *you know, in Islam, it's completely okay for transsexuals to change their gender.* I looked at her unbelievably. Yes, she continued. *It's against religion to force yourself to be something you're not.*

So there I was thinking, *I'm the luckiest person in the world. My mom understands and my religion allows it. This is going to be very easy.* But I still kept it to myself. I went to my room and researched some more on what Islam thought about it. I realized that the religious man my mom follows, Sheikh Fadlallah, is completely supportive of transsexual operations. I thought, *what a lucky person I am. I can just come out. Islam says don't make yourself suffer. If you're not comfortable with your body, get out of it, or else it's suicide. I'm so glad I was born Muslim.*

So the next day, I decided that was the day I would talk to my mom. It is a day at the beach, and I am a moody bastard, crying my heart out. My mom pulls me aside and asks me, *what's going on?* I tell her, *Remember what we were watching on TV and you told me that it's allowed to change sex in Islam?*

*Who is it? Is it your friend?* she asks.

*No it's not her!* I reply. I stand there wondering, *what is she thinking? She's lived with me her whole life. I've always dressed like a guy. People have commented on my boyishness. Now she doesn't even see that it's me.*



Then she asks, *Is it that other friend?*

*No it's not my other friend!* I answer. How could she still be missing the point??

*Who is it?* she demands.

Finally I break down. *Mel it's mel I want to change my sex. I want to become male.*

She just stares at me for a minute. *You're crazy. You want to be a man because your father left. That's why.*

I stand there thinking, *ok, this isn't going as wonderfully as I thought.*

We go back home, she pulls out a pen and paper and starts to lecture me about how I can't be a transsexual because I wasn't born with a penis. I explain to her that female-to-male transsexuals have no physical problems, that they are even capable of having babies, but that this is not enough of a reason to think that they don't have gender identity issues. They take hormone injections in order to become men. I had researched it thoroughly for two years before. And I had started exploring what Islam says on this matter that same week. But she just doesn't get it. She calls my dad in New York and they both refuse to understand it. They think I've lost my mind. I was starting to understand that society plays a bigger role in their lives than religion.

*I've sacrificed my life raising you. And I did it on my own. My parents divorced when I was eight. This is how you repay me?*

*It's not like I chose it! I didn't wake up one day and decide I didn't want to be a girl. I keep trying and trying, but it's impossible to get the message through.*

Six months later, I am sitting with my mother in a psychiatrist's clinic at AUH. The doctor tells her that there's definitely a gender identity problem that cannot be ignored. In front of the psychiatrist, my mom pretends to be understanding. The psychiatrist gives us Helem's number, hoping they'll have some information for us, but it turns out they don't. At home, it's a whole different story. I realize that my mom isn't going to be supportive, so I decide to rely on myself to go through with it. I pay my psychiatrist another visit, but I stop after that because I can't afford it anymore. This is when I start my search for people I can relate to, knowing that there are no trans people around that I could actually talk to. Still, the first chance I got to write, I decide to write about trans issues in the school paper and start to slowly out myself.

My first step was the baggy clothes. I stopped taking care of my eyebrows and hair, slowly. By February 2007, I cut my long girly hair really short. I chose a new name for myself, which was actually a nickname people called me. I started joining online trans communities. I had two piercings, I took one off. Less than a year later, I took out the other. A month later, I started binding my chest. And that confused people, though it brought me sheer joy. The first time I binded, I was so scared. I was looking in the mirror, I thought my mom would realize I was flat, and she'd start trouble. I remember being in the car and pulling my binder down so that she wouldn't notice it. I was having a hard time being comfortable around her.

Till now, she's not supportive of it, but she knows she can't stop me anymore.

I didn't tell anyone until recently, when they saw my facebook status. People in college would ask me why I cut my hair and I would say that it's more comfortable. Then, slowly, I started to reply: *I'm transgender.* They would look at me and wonder, *what the hell?* I would take the time to explain to them that I was born female but that I've always felt

more male. I started to become more open about it and many people surprisingly respected that. I was no longer hiding behind a female mask. There were a couple of friends who just retracted, stopped talking to me, which doesn't really move me. The rest switched from referring to me by female pronouns to male pronouns. I chose the "he" pronoun because it is the one that most closely expresses my gender identity. But the truth is, I'm not male, I'm transgender. I'm very proud to be transgender. Even after all my operations, whatever I end up looking like, I will always be a female-to-male transsexual. It's very important to me that I do not deny what I used to be. I learned a lot from growing up and being raised as a female, spending a lot of time with women. I know what period pain feels like; I know why they get so upset when they're whistled at in the streets. I have learned from my past, and I cannot deny that.

You will lose a few people and gain a few more, but ultimately it is important for every transperson to realize that the only person you need to answer to is yourself.

## MY HIJAB AND I

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM

RELIGION  
COMMUNITY



I have a problem. I've always worn the hijab in a funny way. I've been wearing it for over 10 years now. The other day, my mom said, "You're never going to know how to wear the hijab properly!"

I grew up in a Shiite Muslim community in the South. All the girls and women in my family and my community are veiled. We were taught that something was wrong with non-hijab girls – that something was missing in their lives. We couldn't say they were slutty because they included our cousins.

When I was nine, I really wanted to wear the hijab. I wanted to be a big girl, like all the women around me. My mom said I had to wait till puberty, when I would be about 13. She tried to distract me by offering me my usual short tomboyish haircut, something special that only I got. But I followed her around the house with a hijab until, finally, she caved in. In any case, I got my period when I was 10. So everybody won.

I guess I started having a problem with it just before I came out to myself at age 14. Around that time, I began to discover the world outside the South of Lebanon. I was someone who always stayed home. I would go directly from home to school, and then from school to my room. I was molested around this time as well. I guess that was my way of dealing with it. In the summer, I didn't go out either. And if I did go out, I didn't stray further than the garden.

During that time, I just watched TV the whole time. That's where I came into contact with the Western world. That's when I started to hate my veil. I wanted to look like what I was seeing on the screen. At the same

time, I was coming out to myself. I still had short hair. I started to really want to dress differently. I felt I didn't fit in with everyone else. I refused to wear high heels. I wanted to be more of a tomboy. Since I was a kid, I was already a big tomboy. I would wear jeans and tennis shoes. I wore two shirts on top of each other and stuck my collar out. I would tuck my hijab into my shirt.

But it still wasn't enough for me. I started blaming all my problems on my hijab. I thought it made me look "uncool." I wanted to show off my short hair. I wanted to announce my "dykeness" or butchiness. I wanted to make my hair spiky. And I wanted to wear short sleeves in the summer, not the long sleeves you have to wear with the veil.

Mostly, I craved to send a signal out to other women that I was a dyke. With the hijab and its required clothing, I felt that was impossible. I really just hated it. It wasn't the way I wanted to look. At some point, I started imitating my straight sister's way of dressing: tight clothes, long skirts. Then I realized that this style was designed to attract men and I wasn't comfortable with that. Other people thought it was very cool but I was attracting the wrong sex!

It was then that I switched to wearing really baggy clothes, like my mom does. And everybody protested about this. The whole family. They would say, "You're still young, why do you want to dress twice your age? You should wear things that attract boys' attention!" That's when I became completely convinced. In my mind, if I wasn't attracting women, I didn't want to attract anyone!

Then we moved to Beirut. And the second phase of my life started. I was 18. When I was at school, I would go to work and come back home right after. I didn't meet any new people. Anyone I met, I met online. And that's how I found two people in particular who really changed me:

an American and a German. Both were lesbians. At no point did they ask to see a photo of me without my veil. I realized that these two people, living in the "cool" society that I wanted to live in, thought my hijab was cool. My American friend loved it. She would always compliment me in my hijab, as did my German friend. I reached a point in my life where I had to decide. Either I had to take off my hated veil or learn to love it. The easiest choice was to learn to love it. Taking my hijab of nine years off was out of the question. That would have been like ripping out a part of myself. It would have also caused a lot of problems with my family. And I didn't want to deal with that. People would start to look at me differently as well. A girl who takes off her hijab is considered an even bigger sinner than the one who doesn't wear one in the first place. At that age, I wasn't ready to take it off and deal with all the repercussions. I didn't have the weapons or the support. So I had to learn to love it.

Then I met the lesbian community. And I was faced with a new set of problems. The first thing I heard from them was: "A dyke wearing a hijab?!" How can you be both?!" I got this from a lot of people. Or I could see it in their eyes. I can count only four women who didn't have a problem with me and my veil. I used to really lose my temper. Finally, I sat one of the girls down and explained to her that sexuality has nothing to do with a veil. It's not like I suddenly lose all sexual feeling when I cover my head. I was really worried that I wouldn't find any acceptance among them. I wanted to know why a German woman could accept me but Lebanese lesbians had a problem.

I also faced the problem of not fitting in socially. Most girls in the lesbian community liked to go out to bars and drink. I don't like to do any of those things. If I was interested in dating a girl in the community, I would have to make sure first that she was ok with my hijab before I asked her. I thought it was unfair. I wasn't judging any of the girls because I didn't share their party-going fervor and drinking habits. Why should they judge me like this? I started to feel I was undate-able.

My friends convinced me that if someone felt awkward dating me because of my veil, they didn't deserve me. I get along with great friends from other religions. One is very respectful and never drinks in front of me. You would be surprised.

My hijab even protects me from being objectified by other women. One thing I love about being veiled is that people aren't paying attention to what I'm wearing or my hair style. They're listening to what I'm saying. Either they like it or they don't. And, girl, do I have a lot to say.



## MY BIG HAPPY FAMILY

COMING OUT  
FAMILY

After that night, everything seemed to snowball.

To begin with, I was flipping out. I was supposed to drive my sister home from my cousin's place that night, but she disappeared. It was getting very late. My father called six times to inquire where we were.

I couldn't answer the phone because it was out of batteries. Even more worried, he kept calling and calling. Frantic, I searched the entire flat. My cousin kept checking the bathroom but we both knew she wasn't in there. With the options dwindling, I started suspecting she was upstairs with the neighbor's son. Then my cousin confessed: "Ok! Your sister is hiding somewhere doing something she shouldn't be doing." That's when I lost it. By the time my sister was finally in the car with me, I just started yelling. Somewhere in the yelling, I yelled that I thought I was gay. She yelled back, "Well, I've been there and done that! But now I'm in love with the boy upstairs!"

Imagine two sisters in a car headed towards a night-lit Beirut, suddenly falling silent. We had finally come out to each other. Since then, we have been very close. We ended up having a heart-to-heart the whole way home. With so much to say, we had to park in front of the house and talk even more before heading out. But I was only beginning to realize the extent of the situation. I soon discovered that half my family was queer.

One day, during a conversation with my cousin, she mentioned that homosexuality would be a great idea for a school project. I registered that comment and gained some confidence to come out to her, which I later did. "Oh my God!" she said. "Someone else in the family is gay!"

I wasn't very surprised that she was also a lesbian, but I found it amusing to have a member of the family who was also gay.

A month after that, my other cousin came out to me by asking if she can come with me to Meem. Then my sister asked me to take her to Meem.

Pretty soon, the circle expanded to include my male cousin. When asked about me he said, "I see the way she looks at girls." I knew years of dancing to Britney Spears didn't just count for nothing, so later on I asked him, "And when are you going to get a guy?" forcing him to come out to me. As if that wasn't crazy enough, I came out to my ex-boyfriend over MSN. In a response exploding with hearts and kisses and emoticons, he said, "Oh my God! Yes! Thank you! So am I!" And then he began telling me about his boyfriend and I shared about my relationships. Last week, we had dinner and then we went out dancing with his boyfriend.

I always joke and tell my friends that if a gay gene really existed, here's where they would find it. Even though we are a whole generation of queer kids in my family, none of us are out to our parents. They don't get it at all. Last week, I found my mom making a list of attendees for my wedding. I asked her who the groom would be. "I don't know. We'll figure that out later!" she said.

I've met many gay people who have gay relatives in their extended families like me. Well, maybe not exactly like me; my family seems to be especially gay. But it goes to show you: There's more of us out there than you think.

## UNTITLED

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM  
GENDER IDENTITY  
ACTIVISM  
COMING OUT  
FAMILY  
RELATIONSHIPS  
SEXUAL DIVERSITY  
RELIGION  
COMMUNITY  
SELF-DISCOVERY  
EMIGRATION



# men think they own masculinity and try to defend it from intruders

Dad can I cut my hair?  
*Not Allowed.*  
 Why?  
*I said Not Allowed.*

Repeat scenario every six months all through junior high and high school.

*Fouti 3al beit! Get in the house Now!*  
 Dad I want to play!  
*I said Now!*

Humiliated in front of all the neighborhood boys, half of whom I play better than, I pass the soccer ball back, head down so none of them can see the tears burning my eyes. It's the last time I will ever play football as a child. From behind the wall where girls must remain, every day after that, I stare at the goal.

I don't reach puberty till I'm almost 17. I go through junior high and high school with my very queer body. I'm as tall and angular as boys. I'm without breasts and secondary sex characteristics. Upset, a group of boys decide to make it known that I'm not welcome in Masculinity. It is their territory and furthermore, I'm a freak that won't belong anywhere, *Dickless. Titless. Flat Bitch.* This is what they whisper to me when the teacher turns. Or yell at me. In class, on the way to class, on the way out of class, at recess, on the way to recess, at lunch. Not one of my gender conforming classmates defends me. I begin to hide in the library and write poetry. To Mother Russia.

## dyke hijab

*It's against nature. Why don't you wear your hair down? Why don't you wear dresses? Why don't you show your femininity?* the Moroccan man asks me at a conference. I'm the first dyke he has ever met. He is not the first (homophobic, genderphobic) straight man I've met. I'm tired of this man, appearing in my life over and over as different people. I want to shake him, *Why don't YOU wear your hair down? Why don't YOU wear dresses? Why don't YOU show your femininity?*

But I know that wouldn't be interesting or successful. I tell him my secrets in the hope that one day he will come to terms with his own. *My femininity is not for everyone, I say. Not for the public. I decide who sees it and who does not.* My public butchness is a hijab for my private femininity.

My dyke friend B wears a hijab. I always tease her. Underneath her purple feminine hijabs and ladylike coats, she's a badass butch. Cut off t-shirts and short hair. Her public femininity is a hijab for her masculinity.

## ex

The brochures are blurry. Shock takes away my sight. I don't want to see. The Ex Gay conference brochures. The lesbians smiling freakishly in makeup and dresses, holding the hands of their gay male husbands. It's a refusal to see their bafoonery and betrayal.

The ex gay conference. Full of exexex gays. Or XXX gays?

My mother wants me to go.

*I'm trying to help you. I don't want you to be in pain anymore, my mother says.*

*Mama, the reason I am in pain is not because I'm gay. It's because of this. It's because of you.*

15 minutes pass without words. Her in the kitchen.

Me alone in the living room. With them.

Now we are on our own, no straight people among us. And I look at them. Homosexual to homosexual.

The people in the brochures are breathing, frozen in their fake smiles for the camera.

It's me. I am the camera, interrogating them with my gaze.

My mother calls from the kitchen, *Come eat.*

*No thanks, I reply. I'm ex hungry!*

### frontiers

Someone or something has sent me a message online. It is only one line and written in that horrible recent invention: chat English.

*U wanna chat?*

I go to her profile. No picture. Just the generic grey silhouette. An empty face with a line through it.

No height either. No hair color, no favourite author, no favourite movie.

I go through the profile fields. Each one derelict, like buildings abandoned by war or disaster. So this is how far our erasure goes. Our shame. Our fear.

Gaydar.co.uk becomes the final frontier of my humanity.

And I don't send a reply.

### the bad old days

The three resident advisors were there with the supervisor, waiting with her for me in her office, faces in all seriousness.

They've called me for this urgent meeting.

After half an hour of mysterious introduction, it comes out.

*Inty 3am bitkharbi som3it al dorms!* You are ruining the reputation of the dorms.

Guys touching girls under their shirts. Girls with their legs open and guys standing between them. Girls and guys french-kissing each other on the bench. Under the tree by the dorms. In front of the dorms. Behind the dorms.

And me putting my head on the lap of my best friend out front, by the fountain was *ruining the reputation of the dorms?* We weren't even girlfriends. Shit. I wish I was actually getting some lesbian action. Something to deserve this oh-so-urgent meeting and reprimand.



No wonder my roommate started changing in the closet.

No wonder all the girls whispered and stared when I passed by in the hall.

It's official.

the bad old days II

We wrote on actual notebooks. With pens.

In those days, I still knew my own handwriting.

Subtract your laptop. Subtract gmail. Subtract MSN. Subtract hotmail. Subtract Wikipedia. Subtract google. Subtract Helem. Subtract meemgroup.org. Subtract your awesome Meem counsellor. Subtract Meem and all the girls you know there. Line them up and subtract each and every one in your head, by name and by face. Subtract your girlfriend. Subtract the Meem house. Subtract the couches, the table, the cool queer books in the library, the lesbian DVDs. Subtract "The L Word" off the shelf. Seasons 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. Subtract all the queer theory and feminist books. Subtract Life Bar and Bardo and Acid. Subtract your cellphone. Now go be gay. Try.

They say you don't know what you've got till it's gone.

I say you don't know what you didn't have till you get it.

Or you knew what you didn't have and you couldn't get it.

Wouldn't you run away to San Francisco too?

Wouldn't you stay away for years and years?

Two? Six? How about 10?

I heard they cancelled the Halloween parade last year in San Francisco. The last time I went, I dressed as a man, in a fine suit, cropped hair.

Before the party, I stopped by Jerry's house in the Castro.

*Don't move! I'm getting my camera. I'll be right back!*

He took my picture by the stairs.

I can't get a copy of it.

Because Jerry died.

In the bad old days.

OF AIDS.

Subtract decent HIV medications.

Subtract Jerry.

death of a homosexual

I have a recurring dream

my mother is trying to kill me

with a shiny kitchen knife

what else would a mother use to kill

her homosexual child

I cannot erase the words

so I run as far as possible from them

paris, los angeles, san francisco

how far can I get

I take planes across the world

bus routes across cities, bus stops, bus passes

cars on highways

to drive and drive away from those words

*it's like you're dead*

## WHEN YOU BURN

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM

FAMILY

COMMUNITY



I belong to the lower working class and my class intersects with my sexuality in many ways.

I could never come out to my mother, for example. She had Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. It affected her on the smallest level. She would forget where she put her comb,

As poor people caught in the civil war, her family suffered so much humiliation and trauma. With no resources to flee the country, they became displaced people. They had nothing to eat. They had to constantly move from place to place and sleep in corridors like animals. Entire villages lived like this. Nobody cared.

My mom grew up in a village. After school, she had to do chores or work in the tobacco fields or fetch water. She didn't have time to play with the dolls she sewed by hand. She was deprived of so much already. And then came the war. When she was 16, my mother left school to be hospitalized for war-related trauma. All four of her brothers went to war. She lost her 17-year-old brother. He died the day she and her family fled the village. He died trying to buy people time to escape.

So coming out to my mom is out of the question. She can accept that I won't get married. She has dealt with the idea of me smoking. She has swallowed the fact that I'm an atheist, which was the biggest issue for her. And now you want me to come tell her I'm queer? She doesn't want to know. She sees all the signs around her - the Helem brochures and the pictures of girls kissing, she's seen them all. She stuffs them in a plastic bag under my bed. For me to go against social norms in this way, to have "strange tendencies," would crush her. She built an image of me in her

head because she needs it. My mother has nothing else to hold on to. She lives her life through us. She couldn't provide us with a good life or great education. Pride in her good upbringing is the only thing she could give us. I can't take that away from her.

My dad knows about me and he asked me not to tell my mother. Like me, my dad experiences a lot of desperation and problems with depression. Still, he conformed to society in a way. He's asking me not to confront it, not to come out - to accept that this is the way society is. He knows I can't fight society in the end, especially since I don't have the resources. My dad had to drop out of school too. My grandfather didn't take care of his family. He gambled and drank. As a boy, my father had to work full-time to feed his six siblings. His teachers begged him to stay on because he was smart. But there is a certain humiliation that you feel when you are poor. You know you can't do it, so you just give up. That's what my dad did - he gave up. This idea marks my life. We understood that you remain in the class that you were born and raised in. There is no upward mobility.

Just as my grandfather couldn't bring his family out of poverty, my father was not able to bring us out of poverty. He's very good at what he does, but he can't make money. But we were raised with the village mentality that money doesn't make a person. We don't have money but we were instilled with working class pride. We were even raised to have a certain pity for the rich. They would tell us, "Look, all that money, but the poor guy has a disabled child!" or "his daughter doesn't even take care of him in his old age!" or "his daughter got pregnant without getting married!" We have all these kinds of problems but we are too proud to admit them. Pride and values are all we have.

Class is one of the most difficult problems I have vis-à-vis the lesbian community in Lebanon. I don't really relate to them and they don't really relate to me because of it. Take war for example. I don't have the option



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to leave. Unlike some girls, my family doesn't have the money or foreign passports to get out. If a new war starts, I'm stuck here. I can't tell my friends about my family's politics either. If my family has "extremist" political ideas, it's because they're stuck facing death, fighting for survival.

Deep attachment to family over friends is another thing that separates me from some of my queer friends. Where I come from, you only have your family. Not your friends or anyone else. Your friends will not break their backs to make sure you survive. But your family will. There was a time when my dad worked 18 hours a day so we could live a decent life and go to decent schools. At some point you learn not to care too much about others because your parents and family are the only ones who will really be there for you when your friends won't.

Now we have the Meem House, and we can hang out without spending money. Before the house opened, it was hard to hang out with my dyke friends. If they could spare the 5,000 liras to buy a beer, I couldn't. And if they didn't have it, it was only because their parents didn't feel like giving it to them, not because they couldn't afford it. If I don't have 5,000 liras, it's because there isn't 5,000 liras at home, full stop. Before I started my job recently, there were times when I would get home and my mom would ask me for 1,500 liras. Can you imagine your own mom asking for 1,500 liras? It hurts. That's a dollar. That's what a bag of bread costs. My brother was probably asking her for a sandwich. Sometimes, weeks might go by without any toothpaste at home. My mom would pretend that she just couldn't be bothered to go to the market to buy some. But you know that's not the reason. The supermarket is two minutes away from our house.

As a child, they tried to protect me from these realities. But you can't help but notice them. When you grow up, you realize how tired your parents are. You realize this is not a phase, not just a hard year that will pass,

This is permanent. Whatever happens, I was born like this and I will die like this. I studied hard so I wouldn't end up at a technical institute like my brother. Now I have to work full-time and finish my courses. But all my sacrifices only lead to more sacrifice in the end. They will never get me anywhere. I'm never really going to feel good. At least the technical institute helped my brother find a job. It's taking forever for me to finish my degree and I can't even find work in my field.

In the end, I feel like nothing's worth it. I don't care about a career or my health or anything. What for? I can't keep explaining this to my friends. Not only can they not understand my frustration or depression, it goes even deeper. They don't get it. Getting my friends to accept this is important to me. I don't have an equal chance as they do. I didn't have their same opportunities. I like to read and to have fun, sure. But when they were 16 and reading books, I didn't own a single book. I didn't have anything. I was alone with my depression, with my suicide attempts. Do you know what it feels like when you try to kill yourself and no one notices? I had to cope with it alone.

Today, I have many friends in Meem and I love them. There are a lot of them who understand somehow – or at least they try to. And there are other people like me. But I don't feel like I can go talk to them all the time. Sometimes I feel like I'm nagging. I feel like I'm judged for not being able to "snap out" of my depression in months – or years.

I got a job in activism through people in Meem and their connections. My only hope was to cling to people in higher classes. I'm always in a subordinate or dependant position and I know it. If I left my job, what would happen? I love working in activism. I get to express my ideas. I get to connect with different societies, not just in terms of class. I get to think and criticize and that is a good thing. But at the same time, I will never be part of this society and now I can't go back to mine. I feel passive. I don't want to get too excited about things because I will be let down.

I know I'll get depressed again. I'm exhausted too. And your friends give up on you. Even my closest ones don't know what to do anymore. I know that no one can really help me. No one can bring me out of who I really am. I don't have the ambition to overcome it. I don't have the hope that I will be financially independent, or successful, in my career.

The only change I can hope to create is through Meem, through this activism. I'm always stressed, I don't eat right, I smoke too much. That's the only power I can exercise in this helplessness. So I go to extremes. I say: when you burn yourself, burn yourself all the way.

## TABOO

### DISCRIMINATION

### FAMILY

### SEXUAL DIVERSITY RELIGION



Bisexuals have it much easier. They can always end up with a guy.

At least that's what people think. But people don't know how it is. They're always judgmental.

"Why are you bisexual?" they're always asking me.

I find that question absurd. People never expect you to question them about their questions. I feel obliged to drag them into the privacy of my life. And I hate it. Does anyone ever walk up to a straight person and ask them: "Why are you heterosexual?"

I went through a short phase where I thought I should test myself. I wanted to see if I could do without the gay side of me. Maybe that would make my life easier. I quickly realized how ridiculous that thought was. This is who I am.

Would I rather end up with a man?

The truth, which I really hate to admit, is that theoretically, if I found the same qualities in a girl and a guy, I would choose the man, because it's easier for me in this society. But if the girl's really special, I would still fight for my right to be with her.

Bisexuals, I think, have the hardest life. When you're a lesbian or a straight woman, you know who you're going to end up with. If I end up with a guy or with a girl, I'll always feel there's something missing. But I'm the same person in either relationship. When I'm with a guy, I'm with a guy, and when I'm with a girl, I'm with a girl – end of story. I'm just like anyone else. But I do come out more easily in gay relationships than in straight ones.

It's very hard to find a guy who isn't homophobic in Lebanon. I would quickly realize if a guy I was dating was homophobic. And no matter how great everything is going, I stop wanting him. My sexuality is a big part of me, so even if I can't tell him about it, I'm not going to accept him bashing homosexuality.

My mom was telling me about a woman whose daughter came out to her a couple of years back, saying that she's a lesbian. The woman told my mom: "*3al aleel btammin bel min binti*,"<sup>1</sup> which I thought was very weird. She's not going out with guys and so people aren't going to gossip about her. It goes back to this whole concept that if you're a lesbian, then you're a virgin. I don't know where they got that from. But that's how important society's perception is in Lebanon.

That's everyone's biggest fear: that girls are sleeping around with many guys.

Back in Grade 5, I didn't even know what gays and lesbians were. I had a big crush on my teacher and I told my friends one time that I wanted to marry her. They stared at me in a strange way that I now know is called "homophobic." At the time, I got really scared and I just felt this knot in my stomach that my feelings were invalid. That society would not like it. I never brought up the subject again.

I am Druze and the misconception is that the Druze religion is more tolerant than Christianity or Islam. Some rules truly are very strict, depending on the family. But we're actually not supposed to practice the religion. You give your kids basic religious teachings, and only if they care to know more do you answer them. Or you refer them to someone who can answer them better. We don't get religion shoved down our throats. Very few people have to be dressed in religious veils. So you do get a certain weird amount of freedom. Our religion encourages the

<sup>1</sup> At least I don't have to worry about my daughter.

study of other religions, but, of course, if you choose something else, they'll disown you.

I'm supposed to end up with a Druze guy, which I find ridiculous. If I'm going to marry a Druze, it's going to be just for the sake of pleasing my parents. I would rather not end up with someone outside my religion. They would simply not accept it at all. I don't know. I'm still young and I have time ahead of me. But I'm always asking myself these questions.

With girls, however, I don't care about religion. See how funny that is? It's only marriage that's the problem. My family encourages friendships with other religions. They're quite open that way. But when it comes to marriage, there's a serious taboo that you can't cross. When I'm with a girl, my family won't know about her anyway, so why would I care about the Druze factor?

When I meet a girl, everything goes faster; it's a different way of tackling things, a different culture. A couple of times, I would meet girls and exchange numbers immediately. Whereas when I meet a guy, it takes a lot more than that. I always give it a lot of time. There's always the voice in the back of my head telling me that I should take care.

We, as girls, are brought up believing that we should always be careful. We shouldn't hook up with guys we don't know well. That's Lebanese society. We're brought up to fear what men are thinking.

When I discovered my sexual identity as a bisexual person, I realized there are completely different lifestyles between heterosexual and homosexual relationships in Lebanon. In a same-sex relationship, you feel that you're both on the same level, which is one of the advantages of it. You don't feel that one person is naturally dominant over the other. Things move faster. The mere fact that you've come out means that you

have defeated one of the biggest taboos in your life. So the other taboos, like having sex or going out with people you don't know, don't matter anymore. These are tiny little prohibitions compared to homosexuality.

Bisexuality, on the other hand, is the greatest taboo that remains to be defeated.



## MY SATURDAY JOURNEYS

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM

COMMUNITY

I have to carry the responsibilities of my house. Any problems in the house are on my shoulders. That's how small villages work in Lebanon. You are indistinguishable from your family. I don't want to carry the problems of my brothers. I have my own.

Let me tell you my story. I grew up in a village in the South, the only girl among three brothers and I was always comfortable being treated like one of the boys. But with my father, it was different. I was his little girl. I knew I had homosexual tendencies from when I was very young, but I dismissed them as childish whims. I told myself that I wanted the standard things all little girls want: to grow up to be beautiful, to marry a good man, and to raise a good family.

Money was always scarce in our family, and that created lots of pressures on my parents. They were often abusive and, at times, violent. That was the only "tirbeyi" they knew how to do. Ever since I was little, I based what I wanted for my future on the opposite of what I had at home. I wanted to be financially comfortable, to be classy, to be loved and well-treated. I was set on becoming a famous classical musician.

Then, when I was a teenager, my father died. My life took a turn for the worse. I had to find a job quickly, and suddenly my life was invaded by men – some my father's age – who wanted to marry me. That was the cultural environment I was born into and still live in today. Women and girls are seen as property, as marriage material, as breeders of families, and often simply as sex objects. I became severely depressed at my vulnerability towards all the men who approached me, and I grew very resentful of them and of men in general. That's when I started hating

<sup>1</sup> Upbringing

men. I know "hate" is a strong word and I am generalizing, but that's exactly how I feel. I hate men because of society – their society – and how it treated me.

And don't you dare start thinking, "Ahhh... that's why she's gay." Don't you dare change the subject now that I'm telling you what society did to me when I was a child and pretend to have made some empty psychological breakthrough to which you can reduce my sexuality.

I'm telling you now. That infamous theory that all women become lesbians because they were molested when they were children is just plain false. If it were true, 90% of the women in Lebanon would be lesbians.

Listen to me, I'm just trying to tell you my story truthfully, as it happened.

Yes. Everyone heard the news that my father had died. And because of that, many suitors would come to our house, even at times when I was all alone, and they would proposition to sleep with me for money.

"You are too young to work," they would say. "Let me give you some money. It's easier for you that way." And they would try to touch me.

I found myself throwing angry fits, yelling and screaming at them, constantly haunted by their aggressions. My resentment grew stronger every day. I did come across some good people – men and women – who were kind and understanding, who helped me find a job and continue my studies in music. But the overwhelming majority of the men in my life were abusive, disgusting predators.

I managed to escape all the suitors and not get married, but the pressure to do so was constantly hanging over my head every single day. When I grew older, I gained more independence through my job. I built myself

a strong personality. After my life changed and men became aggressive towards me, I asserted myself more strongly as a lesbian. I don't know if I otherwise would have succumbed to society's pressures and married a man. But the men I encountered only wanted sex. They were rapists. So I rejected everything feminine about me, hoping that would drive them away. I started telling everyone I was a lesbian, that I was a man inside, so that I could get rid of them. I pleaded with older men to look at me as a daughter, or younger men to look at me like a sister.

And no, I haven't been in a lot of relationships. It's very hard for me to find "*bint il 7alel*"<sup>2</sup> because very few people in the lesbian community understand me or the culture I come from. I've dreamed for years of moving to Beirut, of gaining my independence, and releasing myself from the prison that is family, culture, and poverty. It's all I work for every day. I need a partner to stand next to me. I've even considered becoming a nun, although I am Muslim, because I wanted to run away from the world. That's why I would have considered marrying a man – just to escape. But what I really want is a long-term partnership with a woman.

Today, as you are seeing me now, I feel better about the future. It's because being with friends in Meem gives me hope, makes me want to try harder to find my own life and my own society. I have lots of friends in the South, but their mentality is old-fashioned. There, I am very anti-social, withdrawing to my studies all the time. My guitar is my sole refuge. I want people who understand me. I wait the entire week for Saturday to come so that I can make my two-hour, four-bus trip from the South to Beirut to attend a Meem meeting. I save up money all week to afford the bus rides. They are my family – I never skip a single meeting.

You ask about my mother? Well, she still wants me to get married. She has been through a lot. I don't want her to suffer because of me. She

<sup>2</sup> The 'good' girl (Miss Right)



used to get upset when I would tell her I am a lesbian. But when she saw that I was getting good support and love from the girls I meet in Meem, she became very supportive. Every Saturday after I go back home, she sees the change in me, she sees me happy and relaxed. I come to Beirut to see the Meems: my sisters, my friends, my support system. I long for the day when I can live in Beirut and come to the House every day. I want to give everything I can to the cause. I often wish that I could win the lottery – not for myself – but to donate all the money to Meem and its members. I want to sacrifice everything for the cause: for gay and lesbian rights, for women's rights. It has given a new meaning to my life. And nothing is going to stop me.

## MY FORGOTTEN PENIS

GENDER IDENTITY

SEXUAL DIVERSITY

SELF-DISCOVERY

I have a joke I always tell people about the moment I came out of my mother's womb and winked at the pretty nurse. I tell it in response to the common question: "When did you find out you were gay?" Since the development of my first cognitive skills at five or six years old, I always thought I should've been born a boy. Whenever my parents would repeatedly say (like all Lebanese parents do) "*Boukra btokbari ou btitjawwazi*,"<sup>1</sup> I always wondered: Can I marry a girl?

As a kid, I was bombarded with rules and stereotypes about gender. It was always a boy / girl dichotomy. Way before I had any idea about sexuality or puberty, I was taught that boys love girls and girls love boys and that's the way the world works. But what seemed like a universal law didn't make any sense to me. I was never interested in girly things. I cut my hair really short and played soccer and climbed rocks. I deduced, therefore, with my young logical mind, that my feelings for girls could only mean one thing: that I was actually a boy. How else could I have crushes on girls? So I came to the conclusion that, like girls grow breasts when they're older, some of them grow penises.

I figured that God had probably forgotten my penis but would fix me when I grew up. I found comfort in the thought that I was really a boy stuck in the wrong physical body. It meant I was different, but at least it made sense.

The questions stayed with me as I grew up. Can I marry a girl instead of a boy? Can I be a father instead of a mother? Can I do something to change my body into a boy's body? I asked my friends, but they had no clue what I was talking about. I asked my parents, my teachers, and they dismissed

<sup>1</sup> You will soon grow up and get married

my questions as silly children's questions. "You're a girl, you're a girl," is the only response I ever got. And they would tell each other that I would change with time and outgrow my tomboy phase. The concept of growing out of it seemed ridiculous to me. Why wasn't anyone taking me seriously? But still I wondered, all throughout my childhood, how I could be a girl and fall in love with girls. I knew there had to be a link, but I had no idea what it was. The only thing I knew was that the answer was out there somewhere. I looked up books in the school libraries and read through my mother's magazines searching for clues. Anything I could get my hands on, I read. The first and only thing I found was an article about transsexuals in a Lebanese magazine, and my idea of "becoming" a boy some day through an operation was reinforced.

Years passed, and the questions remained unanswered until one day, I stumbled upon a segment on cable TV that showed two men getting married in Europe. I was 10 years old at the time and I can still remember the feeling of excitement that raced down my spine as if I had found a billion dollars. If two boys can get married, I thought, then so can two girls. Two girls can get married, which means that girls can love other girls.

Girls can love other girls! My body was not a mistake; I really am a girl. I just like girls instead of boys. Everything suddenly made sense. Shortly after, I discovered the words "gay" and "lesbian." In my head, I said to myself: I am a lesbian. And the overwhelming joy of my secret discovery made me feel unique and special for the first time ever.

Today, I am 21, and there is no argument anyone can give me that can make me doubt that who I am is natural and real and normal. As I grew older, my behavior and my interests didn't change. I still like doing things society calls "boyish" or "masculine." I still cut my hair very short and play soccer and wear baggy jeans. I am a strong woman who is very proud of her female body. And I'm no longer waiting for God to send me my forgotten penis.



## NOT TO BE

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM

COMING OUT  
FAMILY

I always fantasize about coming out to my family. I imagine standing in front of them, looking shyly at the ground, announcing my great, shameful secret in a quiet voice. That secret that would devastate them all: "I am a lesbian."

But then, my mother smiles. I see my father looking at my brothers and sisters and smiling. I see myself smiling. I hear my mother's voice breaking into long joyous *zalgouta*.<sup>1</sup> My father gets up and opens the window. My brothers and sisters hug each other and they all rush towards me, dropping many kisses on my face. My mother rushes through them to give me the biggest kiss of them all, exclaiming: "*Mabrouk ya Binti, alf mabrouk! Kint jarfi ra7 tigtirfi bihawiytik, shou mabsoutitlik ya mamal*"<sup>2</sup> My father pats my back and tells me he is proud of me. Our neighbor's daughter runs to our house, out of breath, to ask us about our cries of joy. My sister just puts the camera in her hand and my entire family surrounds me to take a picture. My mother hangs the picture in a rainbow-colored frame on the wall.

I call it a fantasy because this story exists only in my daydreams. The family I come from has spared me the trouble of choosing the person I'm supposed to love. In my family, women don't feel, they are not attracted to anyone, they don't fall in love, and they don't have relationships. We are professionally and carefully molded. We live and clean and study until we are exported to another household, where we produce babies that we shape into the same molds that have shaped us. There is no space, in my family, for women to have feelings or emotions.

<sup>1</sup> Arabic yodelling

<sup>2</sup> Congratulations, my daughter! A thousand congratulations! I knew that you were going to admit your identity. I am so happy for you, my child!

I don't think I ever gave my sexuality much thought. I definitely didn't wake up one day and discover my identity. But one night, I heard the word "lesbian" and I understood it without knowing its meaning.

To be a lesbian in my family is not to be. Not to be is to invent a way to erase everything I know. Every essence in my being at that time pointed to a single direction: Life is elsewhere. The last place I journeyed to, I went by force, I travelled far, and I travelled for a single reason: to get away from this cursed house.

But before I left, my father had decided to leave. He is a strong man, my father. All of us in the family rotated around him. He was the center of gravity of our lives. If he was happy, we pretended to be happy. If he was angry, we tried not to sit on the couch next to him. He feels that my sister should become a teacher, so she becomes a teacher. He decides that my brother is a donkey, and my brother becomes a donkey. He decides that I am rude and he disciplines me. My father's leaving came one evening while I was having my first chat with the first lesbian I ever met online. Loud bangs at the door: "... in the hospital."

To this day, all I can remember from that night are little, insignificant details. Even my trip seemed like a distant dream that I woke up from five days later. My sister had become the head of the household, and the new head of the household decided that I had no right to claim any space in that house. My suitcase and I had nowhere to go. And that nowhere pointed to a single direction: Life is elsewhere.

My friends became my family. I crashed on my friend's couch for a month – enough time for me to realize that running away wouldn't be easy. I was overcome with a monstrous fear. Will they look for me? Will they try to find me and punish me? I was convinced that I had to change my identity. I found a job through a friend and rented an apartment in

Ras Beirut. The landlord thought my family lived in Canada and that I was in the city for research. I played the role of the traditional, quiet girl who minded her own business in the neighborhood. But the obsession and paranoia of being found did not leave my mind for a minute. I could never rest from it. I stayed away from all the familiar places where they would look for me. The fear did not go away. Horrible scenarios would dance through my mind all day. They will call the police. My mom will call for help from one of our relatives, "Zammo Waheed," who once put a gun on the table in an attempt to convince me to change my bad attitude with my parents (i.e. to succumb to their choices and, in particular, to stop refusing the groom they had found me; the one who came from America and didn't speak Arabic, but was a proud, jealous Arab, eager to settle down with an obedient Arab virgin who spoke English and was a good cook). In seven months, I changed seven apartments. In the eighth month, I decided to call them.

When I paid them a visit, we drank coffee. My mother asked me if I wanted to come back home. I replied: "I have my life and you have yours." Then she asked me if I'd like some fruit. On the way back to my apartment, I took the long road down the streets of Beirut. There was something different about the air. There was a strength inside that I hadn't realized before. As I walked, everything behind me collapsed, crashed, fell to the ground, and broke into a million pieces.

It's alright to take risks sometimes, whether we are homosexual or heterosexual. By risking, we may lose a lot, but we might gain ourselves. We should refuse the love and attention that comes with its own set of conditions. Those who want to love us must love us unconditionally. They should love our sexuality, our skinniness, our extra weight, our tempers. They should love all the strengths and all the weaknesses that exist inside us.



I didn't put on a dramatic scene to announce my homosexuality to my family. But I did announce it nonetheless. I didn't end up losing my family entirely. I see them every once in a while. But a pain-shielding glass wall separates us.

## IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE FEMINIST AND THE FEMINIST WAS QUEER

GENDER IDENTITY  
ACTIVISM

SELF-DISCOVERY

I am a feminist. So much so that the first time I was aware that I was sexually attracted to a woman, I thought: No way, this feminism thingy has finally started messing with my head. Now, I think I'm a lesbian! And I flushed away the idea for a while, convinced that all those books on women's sexuality and on feminism that I've been reading, and my growing passion for women's rights and for building strong relations among women, was letting me think that I actually desired women. Throughout the next six years or so, I would learn – as I am always learning – that my sexuality and my politics nurture each other, that they're deeply related, but also that they're not ultimately one and the same.

I am queer. Socially and sexually queer. What I like about that term is that it is a space that gives me the freedom of being undefined and uncontained within a social/sexual group. Queer to me is about not fitting into communities and categories. And being generally comfortable with that. I am queer by choice. I choose to be the way I am. But what it also means is that I see people not as guys and gals, men and women, but as a spectrum of genders. And I may look unambiguously woman to people, yet I am not always comfortable identifying as a woman. Women are a social class, and as biased as I am towards that class, I see myself as merely a person of complex sexual and gender construction. Likewise, I am attracted to people of complex sexualities and genders.

I am a queer feminist. I believe in the struggle for equality, and the struggle to better the lives of all people. I believe we have to work to free people from the exhausting job of having to be "real/good" men and "real/good" women. Queer feminism is about presenting them with

more choices to be who/what they really want to be, and giving them the right to act upon their sexual desires and to express their sexualities more freely. It is also a tool that allows me to always question how we are divided in society based on categories we've created for ourselves, into men and women, homosexual and heterosexual, normal and not normal. I am somewhere in between, but I'm not completely controlled by these polarities either. But then I think, neither are most people. They just don't know it yet.



## MY OWN PRIVATE REVOLUTION

DISCRIMINATION  
SELF-ESTEEM

The first real awareness I had of what my body meant was when I was eight. I was memorizing a Sura from the Qur'an for Islamic studies class, and I gave the book to my mother so she could test me.

"No, put it on the table, I can't touch it."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because I'm dirty."

"Then take a shower!"

She laughed at me then explained that she had her period, and that was what made her dirty. She couldn't touch the Qur'an until it was over. And so, I learned early on that our bodies are dirty; they do dirty, unholy things that we need to hide away from the world.

Around that same time, I also learned that I could trade my body in for what I thought was love. And so, I consented that my seven-year-old body be used by the 40-year-old man whose affection I sought. When it started to hurt I wanted it to stop. But he had my heart, and I wanted to please him, and so I said nothing and gave him what he desired for three years.

I carried this with me for a long time. My body became a source of shame. Its smells, its excretions, its folds, its curves, its leakages, it was an alien being attached to my disembodied mind. Uncontrollably *there*. As we approach womanhood, we start to learn intricate techniques

handed down by generations of women designed to tidy up that mess, to impart a sense of control and order onto unruly masses of flesh and hair. We pluck, wax, diet, tuck, hide, rip, cut, sear our bodies until they are deemed presentable to the world. The first time my mother decided I needed to wax my legs, they pinned me down despite my screams of protest and burnt my leg with the hot wax because I was struggling so much and they wanted to get it over with quickly. They ripped out a piece of skin from my inner thigh. After that I snubbed my mother and started shaving.

When I was 15, I decided I wanted to use tampons. My mother promptly took me to a gynecologist, who explained to me that if I used tampons my vagina would turn into a wide, ugly, gaping hole and that my future husband would find no pleasure in it. I didn't really care about what a future possible husband thought, so I used them anyway. When I started having sex that same year, my boyfriend didn't complain. I wondered what other lies I was told about my body.

Despite these sporadic acts of rebellion, I couldn't shake off the feelings of shame and disgust. I fell into a depression, obsessed with thoughts of the 40-year-old of my childhood. As I grew into pre-pubescence, I seemed to attract quite a number of older men in the same vein. I started seeking validation, affirmation, and affection in the only way I knew how. The larger part of my adolescence was spent offering myself to any man who would take me. I convinced myself that this was what I wanted despite the painfully clear fact that it was unenjoyable, painful, and humiliating. But I was possessed by an inability to say no. Who was I to reject someone who wanted me? I wasn't worthy enough to say no. I should just accept it and be thankful for what I mistakenly thought was a brief moment of connection with another human being. I hated my body and I punished it incessantly. I hurt it unmercifully because that's what I thought I deserved. When I was 18, I was raped in the back of a bar.

When I was 19, I was dragged into a 4-wheel-drive and raped again by two men in the parking lot of a club. The more pain my body caused me, the more punishment I wanted it to endure.

Why couldn't my body just disappear? When I thought of myself, I never imagined myself materially, in flesh. I was mind. I denied my body. I wanted to rid myself of it. I spent a long time working through these issues, and decided at one point that I did not want to be with men anymore. They had broken me. I had always been attracted to women as well and found myself drawn to the fledgling gay community that was forming in Beirut. There I found solace and respite, until I discovered that they too wanted to lay claim to my body. Its desires were theirs to control. Any mention of being attracted to men was met with looks of disdain.

There, I also learned that I wasn't alone in my self-hatred. I slept with women who were disgusted by the thought of putting their mouths to a wet cunt, women who refused to let me do that to them, women who fumbled through sex because they were uncomfortable in their nakedness, women who couldn't orgasm because of their discomfort in their own skin, women who refused to let me take off their pants because they hadn't shaved their legs in two days. All this hatred and disgust, it was in all of us. We all carry it with us: this unspoken burden that we cannot distance ourselves from because it touches at the very core of who we are as women.

I learned that visible expressions of desire made some women uncomfortable. I remember sitting in a car with a group of friends chatting, when an attractive woman walked by. I looked at her. I looked at her with desire and admiration and want. My friend turned to me and said, "You're looking at that woman like a rapist would." My desire was rendered illegitimate. We are taught to deny it, or, at the very best,



hide it. Above all else, the body is to be controlled and kept under strict surveillance at all times lest it do something that it isn't supposed to. Like want. Or leak. Or be happy or hairy or chubby.

And so, this was my own personal revolution: I vowed to love my body. I vowed to own it, to let only myself decide how and where and with whom and when to have sex. I vowed to say no when I didn't want sex. I vowed to allow myself to desire women and men without feeling guilty or dirty. I vowed to allow myself to enjoy the pleasure my body could give me, and not just what other people could use it for. I vowed to never let anybody, most of all myself, do violence unto it. I vowed to never let a woman speak ill of her body, to tell her about the freedom that comes with letting go of the lies she is fed about it. This was my revolution, and it is still in the making.

## THAT THING

DISCRIMINATION  
 SELF-ESTEEM  
 GENDER IDENTITY  
 ACTIVISM  
**COMING OUT**  
 PRIDE  
 RELATIONSHIP  
 SEXUAL DIVERSITY  
 RELIGION  
 COMMUNITY  
**SELF-DISCOVERY**  
 EDUCATION

I couldn't sleep after the interview for this book yesterday. I woke up at 1:00 AM, 3:00 AM, 4:30 AM and finally at 5:50 AM. Even though my entire body was aching, I had to get up. I had to go for my morning run. I ran for a little over an hour, carrying a truckload of thoughts with me.

*I looked back at the summer of 2007, when I found myself getting closer and closer to a woman. I couldn't get her out of my head. When I told her, she completely freaked out. She wouldn't answer my calls. I didn't know what I'd done wrong. I wanted to apologize. She was living abroad. So I traveled to see her. But I couldn't find her at her house. Three hours before my flight back, I finally got through to her on the phone. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to inconvenience you," was all I could say over and over again. She was very cold, barely responsive, extremely distant. She clearly didn't want to have anything to do with me.*

As I ran, I passed the Sodeco cinemas and crossed the intersection down to Monot. I jogged past students waiting for their bus, some staring at me, others moving out of my way.

*I thought about how that event became the defining moment in my life. It was the moment I lost myself. For a long time afterwards, I didn't know what to call whatever we had together. What does it mean to tell someone you can't stop thinking about them? I didn't have a name for it. What was That Thing? "It's passion – blind and irrational," my therapist explained. But, for me, That Thing remained That Thing. Whatever it was, it still haunted me.*

I ran on the sidewalk along the Nahr highway. I slowed down to watch, in disbelief, a chicken hop across the road. I ran past the Souk el Ahad flea market.

*I still wanted a name for it. So I started a lengthy search that led me to Meem. But I always questioned my presence there. And yet I kept on going to the Meem house, even two months after my first visit. That Thing was lodged in my throat. I couldn't spit it out. But the longer my life intertwined with that of the women there, the faster That Thing came to having a real name.*

I slowed to a walk to catch my breath.

*I replayed every single question the interviewer had asked me and every single answer I'd given her during our two-hour-long interview. I paused before that final exchange in the conversation.*

*"So you fell in love?" she asked me.*

*"My therapist said it was passion," I fought back.*

*"What do you mean passion? You fell in love," she insisted.*

*Then came the second defining moment in my life.*

*That Thing overpowered me. Before I knew it, those five words came out of my mouth: "Yes, I fell in love."*

*In unwittingly falling in love with a woman, I'd lost myself. In finally realizing that I'd fallen in love with that woman, I'd found myself.*

I started running again, steadily, along the Tahwita highway. One km to go. Cars and trucks and motorbikes sped past me.

My insides were burning. I didn't want to run anymore.

I just wanted to be overwhelmed.